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THE CONSTANT *Shadow*

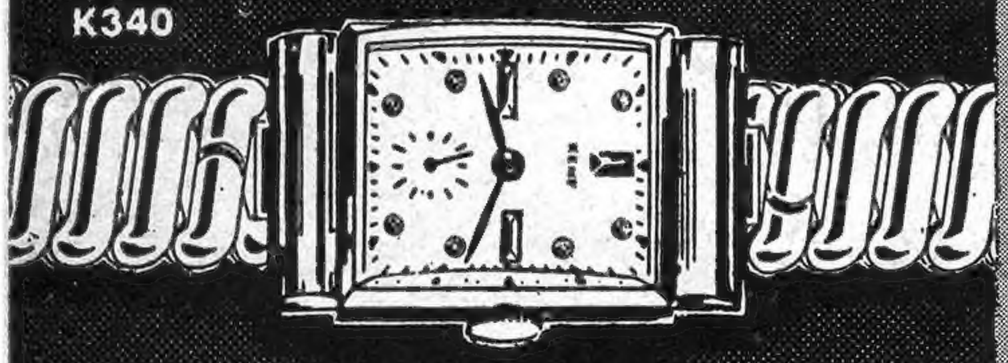
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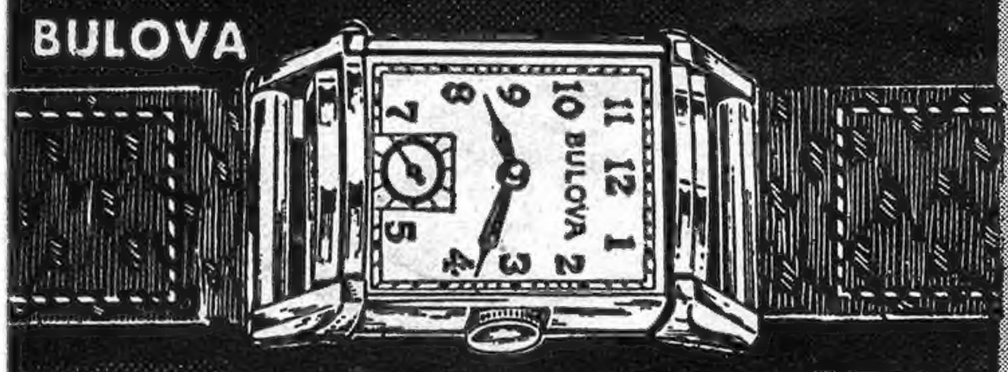
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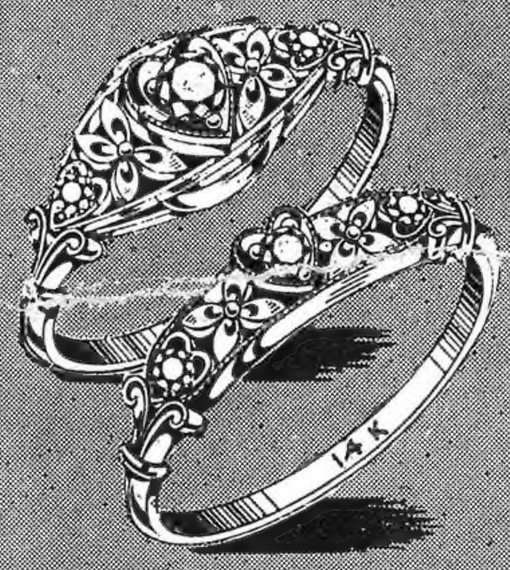
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BLACK MASK

VOL. XXX, No. 2 JULY, 1947

K. S. WHITE, Editor



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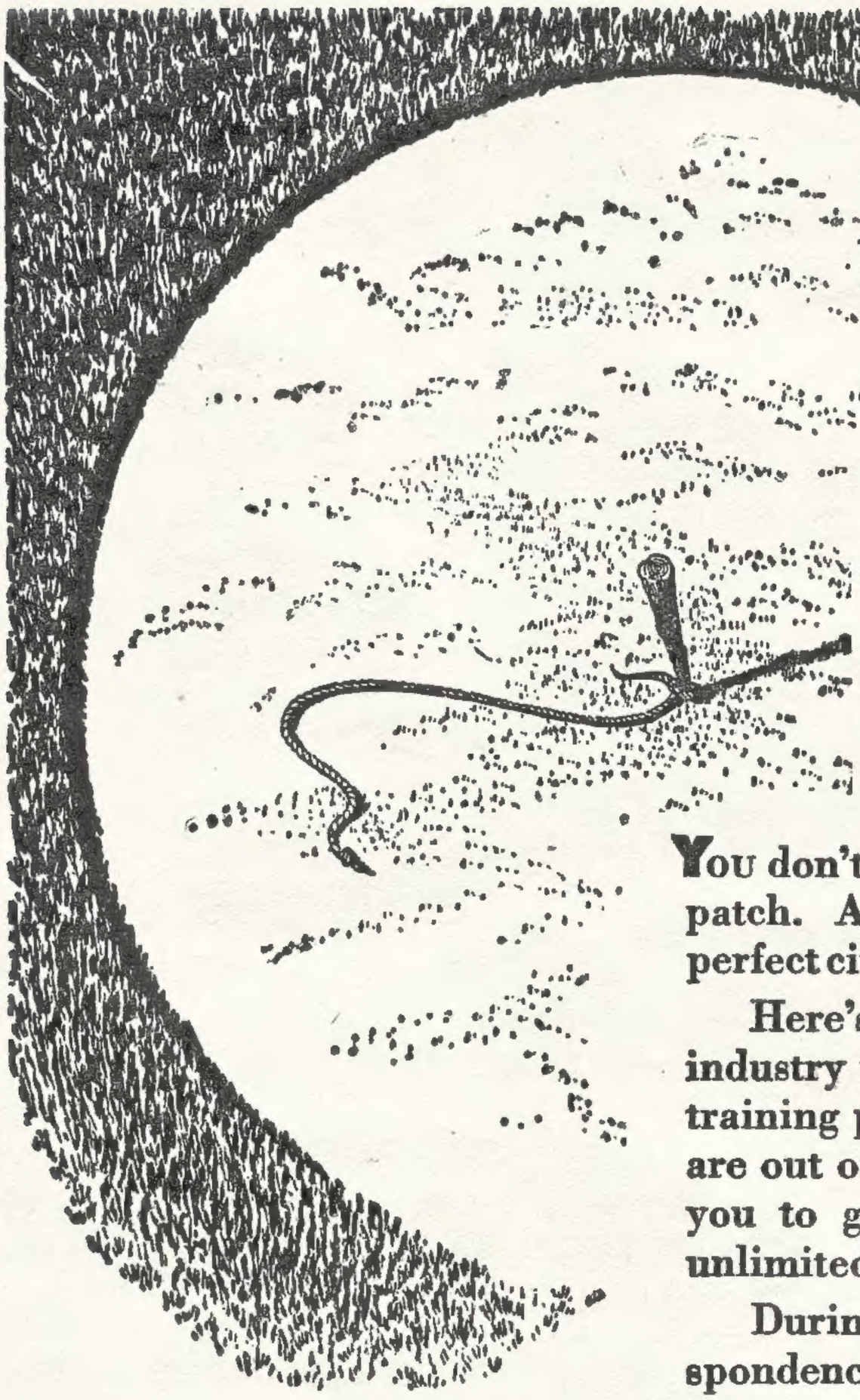
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Death is a shadow, living with us, waiting to envelop us—a disembodied, intangible thing. But Death has his agents, professional and amateur. It was these Dr. Randolph feared—and why he hired Mortimer Jones. For murder loves company.

THE CONSTANT *Shadow*

CHAPTER ONE

Death Is Waiting

THIS Dr. Curtis Randolph was a nervous man. He wasn't too tall, about my height, and he had a thin, unlined face with dark and probing blue eyes. He sat in my office, this hot summer afternoon, telling me his troubles, and chain-smoking cigarettes.

So far as I could tell, his troubles were mental, and I'm no psychiatrist.

He said: "You can understand, then, why I can't take all this to the police. I've nothing definite. It's as though a constant shadow travels with me, wherever I go." He tried a self-deprecating smile. "I—have always had a rather irrational fear of death. That, no doubt, is what motivated my going into medicine." He shook his head. "But the man with the scythe has never been such a constant companion as he has recently."

The man with the scythe was rather hackneyed. I liked "the constant shadow" better. Because death is that, a shadow, living with us, waiting to envelop us, waiting for us to step in front of a truck, or go out without our rubbers. I thought of Mr. Saroyan's tiger.

I said: "You've seen death enough, I guess, Doctor. You've no *reason* to think he's closer now than he's ever been?"

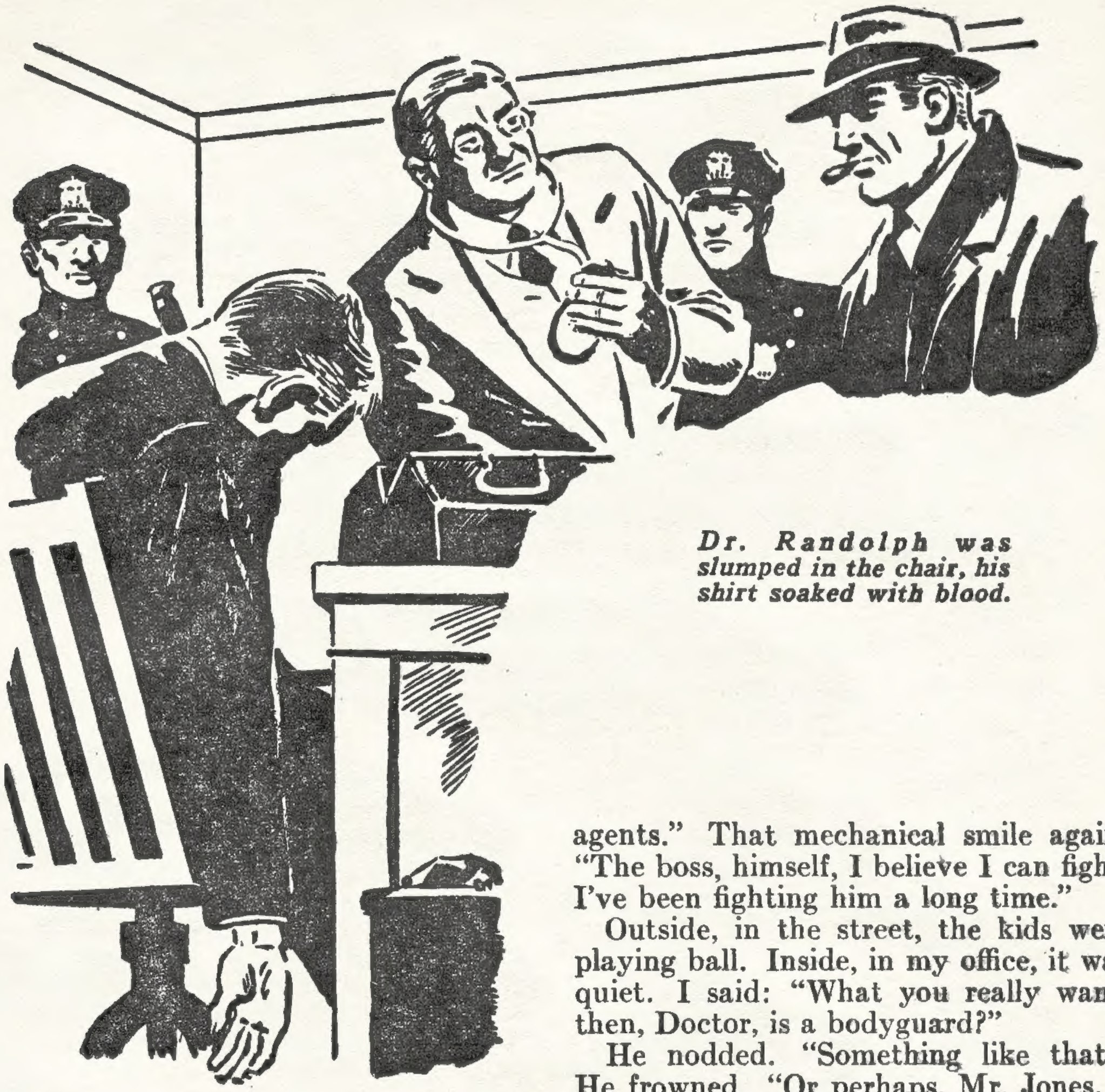
"Well—" Hesitation now in the smooth face, doubt, and the dark eyes covered my face thoughtfully. "Only this—this intuition." He took in a lungful of air through his mouth. "As a medical man, as a scientist, Mr. Jones, I hesitate to speak of intuition. But my medical training hasn't seemed to dull this sense I have, this superstition."

I asked bluntly: "There's nobody out to get you?"

Surprise in the smooth face now. Fear? I couldn't be sure.

"I don't quite—understand."

"This death," I said, "is an intangible thing. But he has agents, professional



Dr. Randolph was slumped in the chair, his shirt soaked with blood.

and amateur. Is there any *one* person you particularly fear, Doctor?"

He hesitated before he said no, and because he hesitated, I knew he was lying. He was a surgeon, one of the best in town and perhaps in the nation. He wouldn't come way down to my grubby office on the wrong side of the tracks just on a hunch. There was nothing I could do about shadows, and I explained that.

He nodded. "Of course, of course—But I said, Mr. Jones, that I felt the presence of death." He paused. "You spoke of agents, professional and amateur. I'm hiring you for that end, for the protection of your services from these, these—agents." That mechanical smile again. "The boss, himself, I believe I can fight. I've been fighting him a long time."

Outside, in the street, the kids were playing ball. Inside, in my office, it was quiet. I said: "What you really want, then, Doctor, is a bodyguard?"

He nodded. "Something like that." He frowned. "Or perhaps, Mr. Jones, I want the knowledge that somebody else is always near, somebody friendly."

"Twenty-five a day and expenses," I said. "Rather expensive friendship."

"Money doesn't matter," he said casually.

He paused, then went on. "You were highly recommended, Mr. Jones. This is, you understand, a job that will require a man of exceptional ethical standards.

By
WILLIAM
CAMPBELL GAULT

I was assured by Mr. Ziegler that you met those qualifications adequately."

Ziegler was connected with a local insurance company for which I occasionally worked.

I didn't like it. I didn't like any part of it, but it was a job, a job for the trade I'd chosen, and there was no logical reason I could give for turning it down. I said: "When did you want me to start?"

"Tonight," he said. "About seven? I'll be out of town until then. Shall I expect you at my apartment, at seven?"

I said he could, and he rose, and I accompanied him to the door. When he'd left, I went to the window; a compulsion neurosis of mine, this watching people leave the building.

His car, I saw, was a Cadillac coupe, a black, new one, and there was a kid sliding down the front right fender. That's why I park a couple blocks away, because of the kids. My Duesenberg has long, sweeping fenders, being old.

The kid climbed off the fender as the doctor stepped into the Caddy. I didn't see any shadow getting into the car with him, but in a car, the shadow's always there. With thirty to forty thousand killed by cars every year, any motorist can tell you he's not riding alone.

Well, he had this fear, this phobia, an exaggerated and irrational fear of death. There was a word for it, and I searched my mind. *Thanatophobia*—that was the word. All of us probably have it to some degree. But not like the doc, I hope.

I FELT hungry, and it was nearly noon. I put what papers I had on my desk in my file and went out without locking the door. Down the steps, past the tobacco store, and I stood on the curb a moment, watching the kids. In this neighborhood, that was the only place they had to play.

After a while, I walked down the block to Mac's.

Mac was talking to a customer, a fattish gent in a loud suit and an expensive panama hat. Mac said: "Mortimer Jones, shake hands with Ed Byerly."

I shook hands with Ed Byerly, as directed. His hand was broad, but not soft.

"Used to know Ed," Mac explained, "in the old days." He winked. The *old days*, to Mac, meant Prohibition, when he'd really made money. To Ed, my boy said: "Mort, here, has an office over that cigar store."

Byerly nodded. "Oh—a shamus, huh?"

I nodded, and decided to ignore him. "One beer," I said to Mac, "and what have you got to eat?"

"Beans," Mac said. "Good beans, with pork. Made 'em myself."

"Some of those," I told him, "with rye bread, with *fresh* coffee." I took my glass of beer and went over to a corner.

I hoped, by this move, to discourage Ed Byerly. To no avail. He followed me right over, bringing his own beer along.

"Some life you must have," he said, taking the chair opposite mine. "I mean, with those divorce cases and all. I'll bet you've seen some sights, huh?" He smiled. "I mean—setting 'em up."

"That work's a little too raw for me," I said. "That end of divorce and labor trouble I steer clear of."

His broad face looked puzzled. "Yeah? What can a private eye do, besides that kind of work? I figured that's all you guys did."

"Not quite," I said. "It's all some of them do, I guess."

He sipped his beer, and shook his head. "Beats me. What kind of work do you handle, then?" He made a wet ring on the table with the bottom of his been glass. "For instance, if it ain't too personal, what kind of work you on, right now?"

How subtle, I thought. *How deft.* I waited until his eyes came up to meet mine. Then I asked: "Who you working for, Ed? Yourself? Or for pay?"

He knew what I meant, though he pretended he didn't. "Why, I got a little racket of my own. I—"

I held up a hand. "Save it. You know what I'm talking about. Why're you nosing into *my* business?"

His brown eyes glazed over. "Didn't know I was."

Mac brought by beans and bread then. Mac pretended he hadn't heard the conversation. I said: "Nice friends you introduce me to. Got any more like him?"

Mac looked startled. Ed Byerly said: "Easy, gumshoe. If you're looking for trouble—"

"Shut up," I said. "Go some place else. If you've got some trouble, start unloading it. If you haven't, beat it."

There was one of those silences. Byerly was glaring at me, and Mac was making some inarticulate sound.

Byerly stood up, finally. He said: "You talk pretty rough for a little guy, Hawkshaw. I'll be seeing you again." He threw a half dollar on the table and stalked out.

I smiled at Mac. "I'm sorry I was rude to your friend. But it's a hot day, and he was so damned crude. Where'd you get friends like that, Mac?"

Mac shook his head. "Look, Jonesy, you hadn't oughta blow up the way you did. It ain't like you. Ed's a windbag and all that, but he's no punk. He ran with the roughest boys in town, back during Prohibition. You shouldn't take chances like that."

The constant shadow, I thought. "You're right," I said. "I don't usually let guys like him get me. But he was waiting here for me, wasn't he? He was asking questions about me before I came in."

Mac's mouth was open. "How'd you know that?"

"Because when you told him my name, when you told him I had an office over the cigar store, he knew I was a detective. I haven't much of a sign up there. You must have been talking about me."

Mac wiped off the table top with a rag. "O.K. So we were. He didn't know you were a friend of mine. He and I did some business back in the old days, and he figured I'd be the guy to pump, I suppose."

"What'd he want to know?"

Mac straightened out a chair. "Oh, what it really amounted to, he wanted to know if you could be had. Bought, that is."

"I see," I said, though I didn't. "And you, no doubt, told him of my unimpeachable standards."

Mac went back to the bar. "Matter of fact," he said, "I told him just about anybody could be bought, that it was mainly a matter of the right price."

I stared at him, but he wasn't looking my way. I said: "I'll have my coffee, now."

"Coming right up," he answered.

Another customer came in after that, and Mac proceeded to get involved in a discussion of the merits of Bruce Woodcock and Billy Conn. I turned my thoughts to this morning's business.

This would be a twenty-four hour job, undoubtedly, and I'd need some help. I thought of Jack Carmichael. Jack had had a lot of bad luck, since he'd opened his agency. Some mess over a woman, a woman with connections. But Jack was a good operative. Besides which, he was into me for a couple hundred. I'd get some of that back. The doc was paying me five a day over my standard rate, and he probably hadn't meant a twenty-four hour day.

I decided to look up Jack. But first, I wanted to see Doc Enright. Doc was a friend of mine; he'd give me the lowdown.

DOC'S office was over on Atwater near Vine. It was a big office with a lot of windows, but Doc's name was on only *one* of them. That ethical he is.

He was busy, this warm day, but not too busy to see me. He's a short, fat gent with an angelic smile. He's a rough man in a poker game.

He said: "Some repugnant disease brings you here, no doubt. But you can rely on my discretion."

"Don't give me that quack-quack," I said. "I'm here for information."

"Free, no doubt."

"I've been hired," I went on, "by one of your colleagues. Relying on your self-asserted discretion, I will reveal his name. It's Dr. Curtis Randolph."

His face stiffened, and he studied me sharply. "Well?"

"Well, yourself. I wondered about him, that's all."

Doc studied his hands, rubbing them. Then he looked up again at me. "Maybe in the top five in America for surgery." He paused a moment, his eyes thoughtful. "You relied on my discretion. I'm relying on yours now. How long Dr. Randolph will keep his license is controversial. He's squashed two malpractice suits, but they were some time ago."

"What's his specialty?" I asked.

"It was plastic surgery, then. Some think it might still be his specialty, but not for the public, generally."

"Criminals?" I said.

Doc Enright smiled that angelic smile of his. "Jonesy, I've already told you more than any respectable doctor should. I've told you this because I know you and have a deep respect for your standards and your work. I will see you again, and next time don't bring any embarrassing questions with you."

I left him and went out to the Dusy. When I started her, she chuckled, in that nasty, mechanical way she has when I'm perturbed. I ignored her.

I drove over to Jack Carmichael's office, but nobody was there. There was a note on the door—*Out for Lunch*. I went down to the Dusy to wait.

Malpractice, Doc Enright had said. In plastic surgery, that could be horrible. That would be motive enough for murder. There was a chance the shadow had more than one agent gunning for Randolph.

There must have been a definite threat, to bring Dr. Randolph down to my office. If it was mental, if it was as nebulous as he would have me believe, he wouldn't be taking a trip, today, without some protection. It was some human he feared, and dealing with criminals, it could be any one of a number of potential killers.

I always get the easy ones, I reflected. *I always get the clean, simple cases.*

A Chev club convertible was stopping at the curb behind me now. In my rear view mirror, I saw Jack Carmichael lean over to kiss the blonde behind the wheel.

Then he stepped from the car.

He saw me and came over as the Chev gunned off. He was waving at the blonde.

I said: "You do all right, don't you?"

"This time, it's different," he told me. "With this one, it's wedding bells. If I can rustle up a few honest dollars." He was a tall, engaging sort of lad, dark and casual. He opened the door of the Dusy and slumped into the seat beside me. "You want something on account, no doubt, Jonesy."

"Not quite," I said. "I got a job that's a little too much for one man. I thought we could make some kind of deal."

"If it's honest," he said, "and doesn't involve physical labor, you came to the right guy." He shook his head. "This love is a wonderful thing, Jonesy, you know that? It's got to be honest."

"Would I be handling it if it weren't?" I asked.

He grinned. "Well, probably not. Let's have it."

I told him what it was, omitting any reference to the information Dr. Enright had given me. I told him what I thought would be a fair division of the spoils, including that portion of his pay I wanted on account.

He nodded when I was through. "Fair enough," he said. "And I'm not forgetting the two hundred, Jonesy. Or the good word you put in for me with the Chief when the boys down at headquarters were out for my scalp."

It was Devine who'd been out for his scalp. And any time I can buck Devine, I do. We have a reciprocal agreement; he hates my guts and I hate his.

I said: "O.K., I'll take the night shift, seven to seven. I can sleep days, even in this weather." I thought a moment and added: "I'll phone you after I see Dr. Randolph tonight. You'll be at home?"

He nodded. "I'll make it a point to be."

I left him, and went back to the office. There, for lack of anything better to do, I drank a bottle of beer, and sat near the window, watching the kids play ball.

A little later, I turned on the radio and listened to the Yanks. But St. Louis

had too much for them that day and I turned it off.

About five, I went over to Mac's and had some beef stew. Mac was still a little miffed about the way I'd talked to his friend, but he greeted me pleasantly.

It was cool in the tavern, and Mac was talkative once I got him started on Joe Louis. It was after six before I noticed the time.

I had to hustle, then. I went home for a quick shave and shower (one room and bath—but I call it home). I wore a neat and cheap blue suit and a neat and not cheap white shirt. I wore a bow tie and white shoes. I thought I looked pretty efficient when I rang the bell to Dr. Curtis Randolph's apartment that night.

CHAPTER TWO

Night Shift

IT WAS a top floor apartment in a fairly new and impressive building on the exclusive upper-east side. These were all studio apartments on the top floor and the cream of the lot.

A short and amiable Filipino in a white jacket opened the door. "Mr Jones?"

I admitted it, and he opened the door wider, saying: "Doctor busy now. Follow me, please."

We were in a hall and to our right was a mammoth living room, but he went the other way, toward a small office or den at the rear of the apartment. I could hear Dr. Randolph's voice, and the woman's, in the living room as we walked back.

I could still hear them when the Filipino had left me. But only the sound of the voices, not the words.

Then the voices grew louder, and I began to pick out a word or two. "Love" was one of them, and it was said scornfully, by the doctor. "Money" was another and it was said twice, neither time scornfully, by the woman. She had a pleasant, throaty voice, despite its angry pitch. Then I heard a door slam, a door I could not see from this angle, but it sounded like the front door to me.

The doctor was suddenly standing in the doorway to the den. He was smiling. "Mr. Jones. I'm sorry I kept you waiting. Some rather unpleasant business—" He shook his head. "My wife has decided to come back and live with me. Shall we go into the living room now?"

I followed him down the hall. The living room had full length windows, towering windows. It had a large, soft Royal Sarouk on the floor and two low, long davenports that seemed to wall off one corner of the room. There was a massive coffee table between them. We sat on one of the davenports.

I told him about my arrangement with Jack Carmichael.

He nodded absently. "Of course. I never stopped to realize it couldn't be handled adequately by one man." He was chewing his lower lip. "My wife will occupy the room down the hall. The door to *my* room is right there." He nodded toward a door about eight feet away from where he sat. "I'll be in there alone; you'll need to be within sight of it at all times."

I said: "I don't imagine you get up before seven? I can have Mr. Carmichael come here?"

He nodded. "I rarely get up before ten, as a matter of fact. I have some work out of town, some nights, and—" He frowned. "Well, I'll explain about that when the occasion arises. If you want, you can phone your assistant now."

Jack answered the phone almost immediately, and I told him how it was. He promised to be there on the dot.

When I came back into the living room, the doctor was smoking one of those monogrammed cigarettes. He said: "I suppose you slept this afternoon?"

I shook my head. "But I'll bet I will tomorrow. Don't worry about my falling asleep, though, Doctor. I've done this before."

He looked at me, and away. He put his cigarette out in a heavy, green glass ashtray and considered lighting another, looking at it for moments. Then he put it away and looked at me again. "You like Chopin?"

I didn't know whether I did or not,

but I didn't lie. "I like any kind of music," I said.

He went over to a Capehart and put on some records.

I didn't know what to expect. What I got was a lot of brilliant piano. It was probably more artistic than Frankie Carle, but I can't say I preferred it. We sat there listening, not saying very much. After about ten minutes, he shut it off and came back to the davenport. He said: "You must think I'm crazy."

I shrugged. "You're playing a hunch. I play them myself."

He smiled a smile without meaning. "I've been thinking about what I told you this afternoon. I've been thinking about 'the constant shadow.' I've been thinking—a man's conscience could be called that. All of us have to live with that, don't we?"

"Most of us," I admitted. "Though there seem to be some who've done pretty well without it."

He nodded, only half hearing me, I thought. He was about to say something, when the Filipino returned.

No white jacket now, but a form fitting, sleek burgundy jacket, well-creased white flannels. The amiable grin was on his face. I thought, *he looks just like any other dance hall Romeo now.*

"O.K. I go now, Doctor? Big dance tonight. Contest."

"O.K., Juan," the doctor said. "Give 'em hell. I want to see you bring home another cup."

The Filipino nodded. "I bet I win. I got Rosa, tonight." He stopped at the archway. "Juan maybe late. Goodnight." He left.

Dr. Randolph shook his head. "How he stays as chubby as he does is a mystery to me. Working all day and dancing all night. The nights he's free, at any rate."

I said: "Which would indicate a clean conscience—or none."

He turned his gaze on me fully. "I suppose you've done some investigating about me, this afternoon?"

"I check all my clients," I said.

"You heard that I was sued for malpractice—twice?"

I nodded.

His eyes closed, and he rubbed his forehead nervously with the heel of his hand. His voice was hoarse. "I—botched a couple of jobs. I was young and confident beyond my—my ability at the time. I—" His voice broke. "Oh, Lord. It was horrible, horrible—" His whole body seemed to shudder.

This was no act, I was sure.

He sat erectly now, and seemed to have control of himself. But his eyes were straight ahead into the gathering shadows at the far end of the room. "My moral code isn't at the church level, I'm afraid. But one thing I can't condone, in myself or others is a lack of surgical skill. Particularly in my—my previous specialty."

"You've given it up, now?" I asked.

"Not—completely."

"Well," I said, "I guess all of us have a skeleton or two in the closet. I've been told about your skill, Dr. Randolph. You've that to be proud of."

He nodded. "It's all I take *any* pride in." He seemed to shake himself of his memories. "You play gin rummy?"

WE PLAYED gin rummy. It's a silly game, and an unpredictable one to my mind, but it does kill time. It killed three hours, at which time I was a little over nine dollars ahead. At our stakes, that was a lot. But the doctor's mind wasn't on the game. Your mind has to be a long, long way off to make any mistakes at gin rummy.

After that, the doctor went to bed.

I turned off all the lights but the large table lamp near one of the davenports. Then I went over to the window, the tallest, center window. Far below, I could see the traffic of the drive. To the west, north and south the lights of the city spread. I was in the shadows, here. At the other end of the room, the table lamp illumined the davenport and Dr. Randolph's bedroom door. It was a strange arrangement, I thought, a bedroom leading off the living room, with no hall. Or perhaps not *strange*, just *uncommon.*

The windows were open, but there was no sound from the traffic below, no city noises reaching this high. I went back to the davenport, and sat facing the door. I read what there was to read in the evening paper.

I was going through the want-ads (Miscellaneous for Sale), when I heard the key in the front door, the sound of the door opening, and a light, feminine tread along the carpeted hallway.

She stood in the archway a moment later. Blue-black hair and dark eyes, the hair up, the eyes gravely considering me. About twenty-five, I'd say, with a slim, arrogant figure, high breasted, fairly long legged. A fine morsel in the archway.

She smiled, a friendly smile. "You're the detective . . .?"

I rose. "That's right. And you're Mrs. Randolph?"

The smile again, and there was some bitterness in it now, I thought. "For the time being. It's nothing I'd care to make a career of. Aren't you drinking?"

I must have looked startled, for she chuckled. "I thought all private detectives drank," she said, "all the time. And talked out of the corners of their mouths. I thought they were all big hulks."

I'm not short, but then again I'm not tall. I'd like to be tall. I said: "I drink as often and as heavily as most, I guess. This didn't seem to be the proper time nor place."

"Nonsense," she said. "Sit right there. I'll get us something. Curtis doesn't use it. He should, poor dear, but his hands, you know, his marvelous, steady hands—" She went back into the hallway.

When she came back, she had discarded her wrap. The dress she wore was some pale shade of blue. A filmy material, and cut low, with a bare midriff. She was tanned in all the places I could see. She went over to a cabinet at the shadowed end of the room and brought back some bottles. One of them was a squat, pinched bottle of Scotch.

She held it high. "This all right?"

It tastes like liquid smoke to me, but I nodded agreeably.

"Ice," she said. "I'll need some ice. Is Juan back in the kitchen?"

I said he'd gone out—to dance.

"Well, would you run back, then? I can't seem to master those trays at all."

"After seven o'clock," I answered. "I can't move away from that door until then."

"Nonsense," she said. "I'll be right here." Her smooth forehead wrinkled. "Or am I under suspicion, too?" The chuckle again. "The sinister female, huh? Sending the poor gullible detective back to the kitchen while she slips into her husband's bedroom, gun clutched firmly in hand—"

I lighted a cigarette, and yawned, covering my mouth politely.

"All right" she said, "all *right*—" She went out, through the archway. She moved with just a suggestion of a swagger. It was entirely possible she'd had quite a few drinks already, tonight. Though the aroma from one is about the same as that from many. There was the sound of water running, and the clank of the closing refrigerator door.

Then she was back with a silver bowl of ice cubes.

"Will you mix them? You'll be sure, that way, that they're not drugged, and it's a man's job, anyway, you know."

I mixed them, Scotch and seltzer. She didn't use much seltzer, I was told. When she came to sit on the davenport, I caught another odor, her perfume. I stared at my drink. There is a lot of goat in me; there is also in me a decent regard for my trade. The two could come into conflict any moment now, I thought.

"Well," she said, "to success." She lifted her glass high.

We drank. I tried to think of something to say, but nothing came, nothing bright, at any rate.

"No bumps, no grinds," she said.

I stared at her doubtfully.

She laughed quietly. "I was thinking aloud. I was remembering a sign in the old Bijou. They were very strict at the old Bijou."

"That's a burlesque term, isn't it?" I asked.

She nodded. "And the Bijou was a burlesque house, one of the best. That's where Curtis first saw me. Three years ago."

She was getting into that alcoholic-confidential mood, I saw. She must have been three-quarters gone when she got home.

"And you gave up your career for marriage," I said.

She looked at me suspiciously. "I suppose you think that's cute. I suppose you don't know about all the entertainers who've come up from the burlesque stage."

"Gypsy Rose Lee, I've heard of," I admitted. "But you're doing all right, now. You've come pretty far, from what I can see."

She said scornfully: "Married to *that?*" Her dark head inclined toward the bedroom door. "I like my men with a little life. If he wasn't rolling in the long green, I'd have left him. I'll leave him yet, when I get a better deal, when I get the kind of settlement I want." She considered me gravely. "Am I boring you?"

"You're embarrassing me," I answered. "And you'll be embarrassed, yourself, in the morning when you remember this conversation."

"You think I'm drunk?"

"A little."

Her full lower lip rubbed her upper lip now. "Maybe I am." She was staring into the darkness at the other end of the room. She rose, finally, and put her empty glass on the coffee table. "I like you, Philo," she said softly, "but I won't bother you, tonight." Her hand ruffled my hair.

Then she was gone, through the archway.

She bothered me all right, but only mentally the rest of the evening. I'd brought a pocket-sized edition of Saroyan along to kill time, but even he had nothing for me this night. I began to get sleepy around four, but I fought it off.

Jack Carmichael was on time, and I told him to phone me at home if anything happened I should know.

THAT was the routine for a week, and nothing happened. On Tuesday night made some house calls with him, but I didn't go in. I stayed in the car.

Jack told me that most of his time was spent in the doctor's outer office with his receptionist. The receptionist admitted to the inner office only those patients she knew. Any doubtful arrivals were checked with the doctor before admittance to the inner office.

Twice, Jack had accompanied the doctor to some small, lodge-like building in the country. Where it was, however, Jack couldn't say. "I had to sit in that damned rear deck, with the lid down, both ways," he told me. "Something mighty fishy cooking up there, Jonesy."

I could guess what it was, but I didn't tell Jack that.

On Friday, Mac told me that Ed Byerly had been around again, and asking for me. Mac said: "I don't see much of you, Jonesy. You find a better spot?"

"That wouldn't be hard," I said, "but the truth is, I'm working all night and sleeping days."

"Huh," Mac said, "a night watchman. I figured you'd have to find honest work one of these days."

I didn't see Mrs. Randolph much that week. She came in late, usually, and she'd go right back to her bedroom, after a few words of greeting.

The doctor's brother, a short, squat man named Alex, I had the doubtful pleasure of meeting Saturday night. He was some sort of promoter, I learned. He and the doctor spent Saturday night over a chessboard. They were both very good. Their openings I could follow, and their end game. The moves in between were too subtle to follow at the time, though I could enjoy them, after I saw what they led to. Either one of them could have given me his queen and beaten me.

The doctor was the master, here.

Mrs. Randolph came in while they were playing. I mentally compared her body to the doctor's brain, and thought, *it's the old, old story. Of Human Bondage,* I thought. But said nothing.

There was some three-sided dialogue, yours truly not participating, and then Mrs. Randolph retired, as the phrase goes.

Only she retired to the doctor's bedroom.

I glanced at him, and he must have been anticipating the glance. He made no gesture and said nothing—but I knew, when he looked at me, that it was all right.

Alex left, after a while, and Juan came in, wanting to know if there was anything the doctor wanted. He shook his head. "But you could mix a drink for Mr. Jones, here. Your preference, Mr. Jones?"

Rye, I told him, with seltzer.

Juan brought it, and the doctor told him he could go to bed now.

When we were alone, he sighed. He said: "That shadow's been a lot less constant these last few days. Nerves, I suppose, and I'm getting over it. I should have gone to a diagnostician in the first place, instead of a detective." Then he added: "Not that I haven't enjoyed your company, Mr. Jones."

He couldn't know at the time, of course, that he would be dead within thirty-six hours.

I said: "This sounds like a termination of contract talk."

He smiled. "Not at all. I'll want you for another week, at least. I feel better—but not that much better." He rose. "Good-night, Mr. Jones. If you'd care to play the phonograph, it won't bother us, if you keep it low."

I told him I'd brought something to read, and he left me. When his bedroom door closed, I walked over to the tall windows. The heat had persisted through the week, but it was fairly cool up here, with an almost constant breeze coming in.

I stood there a long time, trying to analyze the why and what of his words tonight. I arrived at no conclusion.

Sunday night was a dead night. Mrs. Randolph wasn't there. The doctor wanted to know if I played chess, and I told him I did. But it didn't take him many moves to discover how badly I played. We listened to some music, Goodman this time, and he turned in early.

Monday noon, I got the phone call from Jack. He was at the doctor's office, and would I get to hell over there right away?

The constant shadow, it seemed, had finally caught up with Dr. Curtis Randolph.

CHAPTER THREE

Caught by a Shadow

I GOT to hell over there right away. I made the Dusy talk, on the way over, jumping two red lights and otherwise ignoring the law.

The office was lousy with officials. Glen Harvey was there, and the M.E., Doc Waters, and Glen's boss—the chief of Homicide, Devine.

Devine's thin, nasty face looked nastier than usual. He said: "I'll want you and Carmichael both down at Chief's office when we're through here."

"Check," I said.

Jack was pale and nervous, his face wet with perspiration. He said: "That guy's really been giving me a work-out."

"That's the only routine he knows," I said. I looked over to the chair in which Dr. Curtis Randolph was slumped. His eyes were open, his shirt soaked with blood. There was the handle of a knife protruding from his throat.

Devine was talking to Doc Waters. I motioned to Jack, and we went out into the hall. He told me how it was.

The receptionist had gone to lunch, but the doctor was still in his office. "This little fat guy came in," Jack said, "and wanted to see the doctor. Well, he was a friendly little gent, and I couldn't figure him for any harm, but I wasn't taking any chances. I asked him his name, and he said: 'Just tell the doctor his conscience is here. He'll understand.' I went in and told the doctor that."

Glen Harvey was in the hallway now, and looking at us suspiciously, but Glen's all right. He went away.

Jack said: "The doctor sort of smiled, and said, 'Is he a little fat man?' and I

said he was. The doctor said to send him in. I sent him in." Jack took a deep breath, and wiped his face with a damp handkerchief. "Well, the girl came back later, and was surprised to see me still there. She wanted to know if the doctor hadn't gone to lunch. I said he hadn't, that he'd had a visitor who'd left only a few minutes ago, and he was probably washing his hands. He did that a lot. The girl went in." Jack shook his head. "You could hear her scream all the way down to the city hall, I'll bet."

Jack's eyes were haunted. "I phoned the police, and then you. I'll bet the Chief will pick up my license, now."

"I'll do what I can," I promised him. "I'd have done the same thing in your position. You exercised all the caution that seemed reasonable."

Glen Harvey and Devine came out into the hallway. Glen said: "Shall I take the coach back?"

"You'll go with them," Devine said, "in Jones' car. I wouldn't ride with vermin like that."

Jack was white now. He took a step toward Devine, but I stepped in between them. I said: "Easy, Jack. We'll play this smart."

"That's right," Devine said, "like you guarded the doctor."

"You'll keep your license," I said to Jack, "and I'll probably wind up with Devine's job."

There was one hell of a silence. When I turned to face Devine, I almost winced. He looked ready for murder, right then. He knew, you see, that I wasn't talking complete nonsense. He knew the Chief wanted me for the job.

Harvey said: "Well, let's go." He looked uncomfortable.

Devine said: "Let's." And to me: "You're not much of a man, are you?"

"Only when I'm treated like one," I answered. "There's nobody else at the department who ever brings out the rat in me like you do."

He had no more to say, at least, nothing audible.

Jack and I and Glen Harvey went down the steps and out into the glare of the day. The Dusy's motor-murmur had a bit of a smirk in it, I thought.

Through the early afternoon traffic in silence, all the way down to the station. There, we went right in to the Chief's office.

The Chief's a big, fairly windy and competent man. He looked at us all sadly as we entered. "Mort," he said, and shook his head. When he turned to Jack, his eyes were hard. "Let's have it."

Jack told him just the way it was.

When he'd finished, the Chief said to Glen: "Take him to a steno and get it all down and signed. Mr. Jones will stay here with me."

IT WAS quiet in the room after the others had left. The Chief, I noticed, was getting grayer every day. He was looking out the window, a habit of his. Then he swiveled around to face me.

"You could start at the beginning, Mort."

I gave it to him straight, right from the time Dr. Randolph had come to my office. I told him everything excepting what Doc Enright had told me.

The Chief's eyes were thoughtful. "It sounds kosher enough. Only hiring an incompetent like Jack Carmichael could almost be called criminal negligence."

"Jack's a good operative," I argued. "You know he is. It's just because he left the department they don't like him around here. I'm going to need him, if I work on this, Chief."

"Work on this? Why should you? Your client's dead. There's no money in it for you, now."

"Call it my professional pride," I said.

Devine stuck his head in the doorway, and the Chief beckoned him in. The Chief said: "Jones tells me he's going to help you with this, Devine."

Devine colored. "I can get along without that."

The Chief smiled. "I'm sure we can."

"O.K.," I said. "If that's an order."

Devine snorted. The Chief frowned, and said doubtfully: "It's no order. You can work on anything you want to that doesn't conflict with our department work." He paused. "I know you hate the word, and I guess I've used it enough

with you, Mort, but *cooperation* is what we want and expect from—"

The voice went on, and on. I didn't show my boredom; I've a lot of respect for the Chief.

When he'd finished, I was looking properly humble.

Devine said: "We've got a lead on this, Chief. There's a guy been bothering the doc, and he's got a record as long as your arm."

"His physical description fit?" the Chief asked.

Devine nodded.

The Chief said: "All right, Jones. We'll leave things as they are for the time being. But keep in touch with us."

Which was my dismissal, and I took it. Devine didn't start talking again until I was out of the room and the door was closed. It's a heavy door; I could hear nothing.

I went down the hall to Devine's office, and Glen Harvey was there, as I'd hoped he'd be. He grinned at me. "Some day, that Devine is going to scalp you. Some day you're going to needle him once too often."

"He should keep out of my hair," I said. Then: "I hear you boys have a lead on this one already. Fast work."

"You hear the damnedest things," he said, and his eyes were blank.

"I'm going to work on this, Glen," I said. "I'm not going to get in anybody's way, but *I've got to know* about this one."

He shook his head. "I'm not saying a word. Excepting that I like to eat. I like to eat every day. Nothing personal, Jonesy."

"O.K.," I said, "nothing personal." It would be, I thought, in poor taste to tell him of the time I got *him* in the papers, picture and all. I did not want to be guilty of that.

I went out, and down to the Dusy. Jack Carmichael was sitting in the Dusy, smoking a cigarette and staring into space.

When he saw me, he said: "They showed me a million pictures in there, Jonesy, and some of them were pretty close. But I wasn't sure about any of them. I think, even in a picture, I'd be sure of that little, fat mug."

"I'm going to stay with this," I said, "at my own expense."

Jack said quietly: "The way I botched this, you probably won't want me around. But I've nothing else to do, Jonesy. I'd like to stay with it, too."

"I'd be grateful for the help," I told him. "I can't see a guy staying in town when he knows you got his picture in your brain. Unless he plans—" I paused. "You be careful, Jack. You keep yourself armed."

"From here in," he promised, "all the time." Then: "And thanks."

I wasn't tired, now. I should have been, with only four hours' sleep, but I kept seeing that knife handle protruding from the doctor's throat. There's something about a knife . . .

The air was sultry and depressing, but it would be cool at Mac's, and so would the beer.

THERE were a couple of customers in the place, and one of them was the proprietor of the tobacco store under my office. He was reading Mac's paper, and so was Mac. It was a new edition.

They both looked up when we entered. Mac said: "Tough luck, Jonesy."

The murder was all over the front page.

"It happens to the best of us," I said. "Two beers."

Mac drew them, and brought them over. I asked: "Ed Byerly been in to ask about me lately?"

He shook his head. "You think maybe, Jonesy, he—"

"I don't know what to think," I said. "What have you got to eat?"

He had chili, and so did we. It was good chili; Mac would make somebody a good wife. We had rye rolls. Jack had another beer, and I had some coffee despite the heat.

When we were finished, I said: "I'm going up to see the widow. You find out what you can about this Byerly. Still got that jalopy of yours?"

He nodded, "Runs like a new car."

I gave him a twenty, and he left.

I went up to the office to check the mail. There wasn't much, mostly ads and a few bills. The phone rang, and it was Doc Enright. He said: "I've been reading the paper."

"Didn't know you could read," I said.

"They probably had you down at headquarters grilling you."

"I was down there."

"Jonesy—you didn't tell them anything I was foolish enough to tell you?"

"I didn't. You didn't tell me anything that Dr. Randolph didn't tell me himself, the first night I saw him. You can put your ethics right back in mothballs."

"All right, Sherlock. I suppose we'll get the whole juicy story tomorrow night?"

Tomorrow night was poker night. I said: "You'll get all the papers will tell you. I've got ethics, too."

"Huh," he said. "A man who'll check and raise. Ethics, huh." He hung up.

I decided not to call Mrs. Randolph first. There was a chance she wouldn't be home, but it wasn't much of a trip, anyway. The Dusy made it in eight minutes.

Juan opened the door. I said: "It's rather important, Juan, that I see Mrs. Randolph. Will you tell her that?"

He nodded and went toward the living room, leaving the door ajar. I heard the murmur of voices, and then he was back.

"Mrs. Randolph see you." He nodded toward the living room.

She was sitting on one of the big davenports, smoking. There was a half emptied glass of liquor in front of her, and the familiar shape of the Scotch bottle next to that. She was wearing a dressing gown. What was under it, I couldn't know. I would guess it was nothing.

"Philo," she said. "It's been a bad day, hasn't it? I suppose you're here for your check?" The dark eyes were mocking.

"I'm here," I said, "for what information I can get. This must have been a blow to you, Mrs. Randolph."

She stared at me levelly. "Nothing I can't bear up under. Don't let that little incident the other night give you any ideas, Philo. I *was* his wife, you know."

"I thought perhaps—" I said, and stopped.

She smiled and shook her head. "Drink?"

"If you've got some rye."

She inclined her head in the general direction of the cabinet at the far end of the room. "Would you mind getting it yourself?"

I went over and got a bottle of rye. I brought it back and mixed a drink. It was excellent rye.

She sipped her drink, and asked: "What kind of information were you looking for?"

"About his enemies, if any. About anyone who would have reason to be an enemy or who might benefit from his death."

"You could take the phone book," she said, "and pick every other name. He was a man with an unusually high quota of enemies. I guess I'd benefit the most from his death. Have you thought of that, Philo?"

"I've thought of it," I admitted. "And the name is Jones, Mortimer Jones. You wouldn't want me to call you Cleopatra, would you?"

That chuckle of hers and the dark eyes merry. "O.K., Mortimer." She considered me. She reached over to set her glass down, and I modestly averted my eyes. It took some will power. She said quietly: "How would you like a drive this afternoon?"

I knew what she meant. I said: "I'd like it."

She rose. "O.K. I'll be dressed in a jiffy. I've already had my shower." She walked over to the archway, and turned. "But I'll be damned if I'll wear black in this heat."

Even in burlesque, I reflected, they had to have their exit lines.

It was hot. *I* was hot, and I thought it must have been the chili and the coffee, for it was far cooler up here than it had been outside. I smoked a cigarette and finished my drink. I didn't mix another.

SHE didn't wear black. She wore white, a revealing type of material. No stockings, white shoes, a white flower in her blue-black hair. She was something to see.

I said: "Won't you be needed this afternoon?"

"Alex is taking care of everything," she explained. "I don't know what I'd do without dear Alex."

Alex, I remembered, was the doctor's brother and chess opponent.

We went down in the elevator, and out into the humid day. I opened the door of the Dusy for her.

"Lordy, lordy," she said. "What in the world is this?"

"It's a Duesenberg," I said proudly. "It's an orphan, but still the finest car in the world."

"You must be doing all right," she said, and got in.

It was, I told her, my only extravagance.

"Besides women, of course. A car like this would be wasted, if you weren't on the prowl."

"A car like this," I told her, "makes women unnecessary."

She looked at me doubtfully, but said nothing.

It was a nice drive, up along the river to Brown Deer and out the Brown Deer road to a gravel road that led north. She directed me all the way. The gravel road was narrow and winding, flanked by some second growth stuff that wasn't used for farming nor grazing, so far as I could tell.

After about a mile of this, we came to another, even narrower road, and she indicated that I should take it. There was a gate here, and I got out and opened it.

I drove through, and stopped. But she said: "Never mind closing it. There's nobody here, and we'll be coming right back."

We came, finally, to a low, white building about the size of a five room cottage. But it was no dwelling, I felt sure. It looked too utilitarian. The windows were evenly spaced, the door was directly in the center of the end nearest us.

The door wasn't locked, and we went in.

Three small rooms, just cubicles, with a single bed in each, white, hospital beds. A small laboratory with a big sink, the walls lined with shelves, the shelves lined with bottles. A minute bathroom.

And the biggest room—the operating room.

We stood there, and my glance covered the operating table, the light above it, the white equipment.

"Here's where he made his money," she said. "He did some fine work, but he might have slipped from time to time. With these kind of people, it's best not to slip. Murder isn't always outside their line of work."

"He had an assistant here? He must have had at least one."

"If he did, I never met him—or her. If he did, he—or she—is probably in Paducah by now." She shook her head. "I've seen some of his better work. Your own brother wouldn't know you, when he got through." She shook her head again. "Let's get out of here."

We went out and got into the car. I asked: "You've told the police about this place?"

"Not yet. They didn't spend much time with me."

I set the speedometer on the Dusy. I wanted to give the Chief directions as accurate as possible.

We didn't talk much on the way back. When I stopped in front of the apartment, she said: "Come on up. I'll give you a check for what Curtis owed you. I don't want you to lose that."

I went up with her, and she wrote out the check.

She was standing close to me as she handed me the check, and she was smiling.

I was looking down into those blue eyes, and I must have swayed towards her. I'm only human.

"Why don't you kiss me?" she asked mockingly. "You want to."

I kissed her. The pressure of her firm, round body was constant and demanding. I hated my business, at the moment.

I pulled away finally. I said: "Won't expect a bonus for that." I took the check and got the hell out.

But I heard her say, before I closed the door: "Are you still satisfied with just the car?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Murder Makes the News

THE Dusy murmured to me as I drove back to the office, but it wasn't anything I could understand.

From the office, I phoned the Chief and told him about the hidden hospital, giving him the mileage I'd copied off the Dusy's speedometer.

As I was hanging up, I heard the feet on the stairs. A few seconds later, Alex Randolph's squat figure was framed in my open doorway. I rose.

He looked sad, as he would. He also looked angry and determined. He said: "They've been giving me the run-around down at headquarters. They don't like me too much down there, I guess."

"Nothing personal, I hope," I said.

"Nothing but a couple of promotions of mine they couldn't solve. They hate you down there, when you're too smart for them."

I said nothing. I indicated the chair on the retail side of my desk.

He sat down, and said: "I want to hire you. I want you to find out who killed my brother."

"I'm working on it," I said.

"That's good. There's nothing they'll ever discover down there. They get anything tougher than a parking ticket, they start running around in circles."

Which wasn't true and I knew it. I said: "Did you know an Ed Byerly?"

He hesitated. "Sure. I mean, I know who he is and who his sister is. You think . . .?"

"Could be," I said. "Why did you mention his sister?"

"Because that's why Curt was paying Ed. This sister was a beauty, at one time, you understand? And she had this automobile accident. It left a scar or two on her cheek. They weren't too bad, but Curt talked her into an operation. He was younger, then." Alex Randolph shook his head. "God, what a mess he made of that."

"And that's why he was paying Ed Byerly?"

Alex frowned. "Not—quite. Ed got nosey. He found out some other things about Curt. He was trying to find out more, lately. I think that's why Curt hired you." He stared at me. "Say, that Byerly answers the description all right, doesn't he?"

So do you, I thought, but didn't say. I nodded.

"Stick with it," he said. He rose, and laid a couple of bills on the desk. They were hundred dollar bills. "If you need more, let me know."

I told him my rates.

"Never mind that. I got three more like that for you if you crack this." He expelled his breath. "Byerly, that son of a—"

"We're not sure it is Byerly," I warned him.

"Who else?" he asked. "Can't understand why I didn't figure him right away." He left.

Who else, I thought. Well, yes, who else . . .

I went over to Mac's. I left a note on my door for Jack, telling him I was there. I stood on the curb in the sun for a minute or two, watching the kids, and then walked down to Mac's.

It was cool in there, and the beer was exactly right. Mac was explaining to a customer about the artistry of Tommy Loughran. "You notice any marks on him?" Mac asked his listener.

The customer said, no, he never had.

"An artist, that's why," Mac said. "Like a shadow he was, in the ring, moving so easy and quiet and nice—"

Like a shadow, the constant shadow, I thought, and sipped my beer. A kid came in with some papers and put them on the bar. The door swung listlessly behind him.

There was a picture, I could see, on the front page of the paper. I moved closer. It was a picture of Ed Byerly. It was, the story with the picture stated, a man

whom the police were looking for, right now. I remembered this morning, in the Chief's office, and the lead Devine had. This was the lead.

"Friend of yours in the news, Mac," I said.

He picked up the paper and read a moment. "Jonesy, my gosh, it's—"

"You and your friends," I said.

He was pale. "Jonesy, you gave 'em this. If Ed thinks I told you—"

"He'll come and get you with a knife," I finished for him. "No, I didn't give it to them, Mac. They've got their own sources of information."

Jack came in at that moment. I showed him the paper. He nodded. "I've already seen it." He looked sick. "And I saw his sister, this afternoon, Jonesy. I was over at her house. Lord—"

"I heard about her," I said. "What did you learn?"

"He hasn't been home since this morning. He told her, when he left, that he was taking a little trip in the country. If it's true, Jonesy, he couldn't have—"

"If it's true," I said. "Did you see the picture?"

"Sure. I picked it out as one of the possibilities, down at the station this morning. But it's only a possibility. I'd be *sure*, I think, if I saw the picture of the real killer."

"As I remember Byerly," I said, "this isn't too good a likeness. It's probably an old picture."

Mac was listening in. and he nodded. "That's the way Ed used to look, though. He seemed to put on a lot of wrinkles, lately."

My lack of sleep was getting to me now. I said: "I think we'll give this business a rest tonight. I've had enough for one day."

Jack said: "If you won't want me, I think I'll give the blonde a ring. I'd like to look at something that'll take that picture of Mary Byerly out of my mind."

"I won't need you." I said. "I'll see you in the morning. And Jack, *remember to be careful.* You're the number one witness—don't forget that."

He promised he would, and left. I worried about him. I knew what an easy, fearless sort of gent he was, and how lightly he valued his life.

Mac said: "I wouldn't want to be him. That guy could very easy be victim number two, from witness number one."

"In our business, you never know," I said. And, because I was tired and not too sharp: "We live with the constant shadow."

Mac was staring at me when I walked out.

IN THE room I call home, I pulled the bed out of the wall. I took a shower first and listened to the radio a while, but Morpheus kept calling. I hit the hay early.

In the only dream I remember, I was in a sort of circus procession made up of baby elephants with smiling faces. All of them cast big elephant shadows,



TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER

and I couldn't figure out quite why.

The sun was high when I woke. It was still damp out, but the sun was there, working. I put some coffee on to boil before taking another shower.

Down at the office, I opened all the windows wide to get what breeze I could. When I turned, after opening the last one, I saw the girl standing in the doorway.

A tall, dark and serious girl, dressed plainly. A handsome girl, despite the plainness of her dress and hair-do. She said: "You're Mr. Jones?"

I nodded, and indicated the customer's chair.

She took it, and said: "My name is Ella Hamilton. I worked for Doctor Randolph." She paused. "I read about Mr. Byerly in the paper."

I said: "You're not Dr. Randolph's receptionist, are you?"

She shook her head. "I worked for him at that place up in the country. I was his nurse up there, and general assistant."

I could only stare at her. She hadn't looked, to me, like a girl who'd stray outside the law.

Some of my disbelief must have shown, for she said: "Would you come over here, please?"

It could have been a trap, but her hands were empty, her purse on my desk. I came over to stand close to her.

Her hands were above her head now, and then she pulled the hair above her ears high. "See," she said.

I could see the fine, hair-like scars there. "I see," I said.

Her smile was dim. "I owed Dr. Randolph a lot. I'm just trying to justify myself, I suppose, but before Dr. Randolph did that, I never appeared in public without a veil. Do you believe, now, that I worked for the doctor up there?"

"I believe you."

"Yesterday, around noon," she went on, "this Mr. Byerly drove into the yard up there. I didn't know what to do. I was frightened, but he seemed harmless enough. He told me he'd been looking for that place for a long time. He seemed to be—gloating. He looked everything over and asked if I was expecting the doctor."

"Around noon?" I interrupted.

"That's right. He didn't leave until one o'clock."

I said: "But then, he couldn't have—"

She nodded. "That's why I'm here. I couldn't go to the police. You can understand that?"

I admitted I could.

"But I saw his picture in the paper, and they seemed so sure he was the man. I couldn't just stand by, knowing what I did."

I asked: "Where were you yesterday afternoon, when I was up there?"

"As soon as Mr. Byerly left, I left. I wanted to warn the doctor. When I got to town, I learned what had happened. I couldn't go back to the hospital after that." Her voice shook. "It's not a nice thing to say, I know, but in a way, I'm glad he's dead. I'm free of that, now."

I said quietly: "A time will come, probably, when you'll have to tell all this to the police, when you'll have to sign a statement to all this."

She nodded. "I suppose so. But—" She shrugged.

I said: "I'll try to make a deal for you."

She reached for her purse, but I shook my head. "There'll be no charge for that. If I accepted money for that, *I'd* be making the deal, not you. Can you understand ethics as involved as that?"

The dim smile again. "I think I can. I've had some personal experience with involved, with *twisted* ethics. There was this gratitude, this loyalty, you see, on one side, and still—"

"I understand," I said. "It might take some talking to make the police understand, however. But I might manage it."

She gave me her address and telephone number.

Then I asked: "Dr. Randolph was a strange man, wasn't he? Had he ever displayed any thanatophobia before?"

She looked at me blankly.

"Irrational fear of death," I explained.

"Oh, yes. He was quite morbid about it. He hated death and feared it. He

talked of it, often. You aren't the first detective he'd hired."

After she'd left, I contemplated calling headquarters. But I decided against it. If they found Byerly, he might have some good information. If they continued to look for Byerly, the real murderer would feel safe, and might—just might—make a mistake.

I phoned Jack Carmichael, and told him: "I want you to stick with Alex Randolph all day, Jack. At least, until midnight. I want to know every place he goes in that time. I'll get it from you tomorrow."

He said: "I can probably pick him up at the house, this time of the day."

"Right. If you need me, and I'm not at the office, leave the message with Mac. That blonde give you a rough time last night?"

"Ah, Chief," he said, "it's not *that* late. And she's a lady."

"O.K.," I said. "It's still early enough to get in a full day's work. And be very, very careful. You're a valuable man right now."

I HUNG up, feeling like a tough employer. Well, Byerly had finally found what he wanted, what he'd probably been looking for for a long time. That's why he hung around the doctor, to get something with more financial potentialities than the doctor's conscience and a threatened malpractice suit. He'd found it—too late.

I thought of Ella Hamilton, and hoped I'd be able to do something for her. The longer I delayed telling the police what she'd told me, the less I could do for her. Withholding information from the law isn't the brightest thing in the world to do.

Doc Enright phoned and wanted to know, would I be at the game tonight? I said I thought I would. Unless something came up.

He asked: "What's new on the Dr. Randolph business, Jonesy?"

"Just some rumors," I kidded him. "I hear half the medicos in town are going to be mixed up in that mess, before it's finished."

There was a silence. Then: "You're kidding, Jonesy."

"No more than usual," I told him. "Bring a lot of money, tonight. I've revenge due me, and I mean to get it."

"Huh," he said, and hung up.

It was right after that the silly rhyme began running through my mind. Nothing that made sense, but it sounded like it was trying to. The pattern was forming.

I wondered about Byerly, where he was now. If he wasn't guilty of murder, he was guilty of blackmail, and the police would have the story on that by now. He had reason enough to hide.

But, still, he had Ella Hamilton as an alibi witness . . . Maybe, he'd get in touch with her. Damn it, I had no right to keep information like this from the police.

I fretted, and the rhyme ran through my mind, and the day grew warmer and more humid. This indecision is one hell of a state.

I decided, finally, to go out and park near the address Ella Hamilton had given me.

It was a lower-middle-class section of town, west of the river. I parked the Dusy about two blocks away, and walked over. I was in luck.

For, right opposite the rooming house in which she lived there was a small branch library. This library had a large, plate glass window on the street side, and I could see the reading tables behind it. I went in and read some Hemingway.

Of course, I wasn't reading it too closely. I was playing private detective and feeling exceptionally cunning. Any moment, Byerly should have come along and sneaked up those steps to the front door. Or Juan, or Alex Randolph, or any other little, fat man who might be involved in the death of Dr. Curtis Randolph.

Nobody like that came along. There was a laundryman who went up the steps and came down again, carrying a bundle of laundry. There was a fat woman who went up, carrying a bag of groceries. She didn't come down again,

and I could deduce that she probably had enough groceries to last for some time. I might not see her again for days. There was a thin, shabby gent with a briefcase who looked like a collector to me. I'm familiar with the breed.

But there was nobody who looked sinister or suspicious or even little and fat. I went up the steps, finally, myself.

Ella Hamilton's room was on the second floor, in front, and she was home. The room was shabby, but clean. Most all rooming house rooms are shabby, I think. But she kept this one scrupulously clean.

I tried a winning smile, and said: "I've been worried about you. I've been watching the front door."

"About me?" She looked puzzled. "Am I in danger?"

"If Byerly isn't the murderer," I explained, "and the real murderer knows you're Byerly's alibi, it would be to his interest to—visit you, wouldn't it?"

She looked frightened. "I never thought of that."

"Frankly," I went on, "I've been expecting Byerly. But he probably doesn't know where you live. I'd prefer it if *nobody* knew where you lived. You've a car?"

She nodded.

There was only one person I could think of who'd have room. Doc Enright lived with a maiden aunt in a mammoth house on this side of town. He'd have room, and the maiden aunt was the hospitable sort.

I phoned Doc from the pay phone in the hall downstairs and told him what I wanted.

It was all right with him. "Some babe of yours?" he asked.

I didn't answer that, but went up again and explained it all to Ella Hamilton. It didn't take her long to pack. I gave her the address and told her I'd meet her over there, in front of the house.

Nobdoy followed her, so far as I could tell. Nobody but me, that is.

Doc phoned his aunt by the time we got there, and she was a marvel. She even made me feel at home, and I wasn't staying. I said "so long" to Ella Hamilton and drove over to Mac's. All the way over that silly rhyme went running through my head.

Mac was mopping out the joint. He had his shirt off, but he was still wringing wet. "What a life," he said. "If you want beer, you'll have to draw one yourself."

I went behind the bar and drew a tall, cool glass of beer. There was a slip of paper on the bar with a phone number on it, and I picked it up, idly.

"Oh, that's right," Mac said. "Some babe in a Chev convertible left that number for Jack to call. 'If he isn't dead,' she said. Now, what could she have meant by that?"

CHAPTER FIVE

A Very Nasty Racket

IF HE isn't dead . . . "I don't know what she could mean," I told Mac. "What'd she look like?"

"Like just another blonde to me," Mac said. "Not anything you'd ignore in a crowd, understand, or leave your wife for. Just a blonde, just another dame."

Mac's cynical.

"Jack can't be dead," I said. "He's being careful. He promised he'd be careful."

"Lots of formerly careful guys are dead," Mac said, and then he was staring at me. "Hey, Jonesy, you think—"

But I was already putting a nickel in Mac's phone.

A man answered, and I said: "I'm looking for a blonde with a Chev coupe."

"I'm looking for one with a Lincoln, myself," he answered. "You're easy to please."

"This is important," I told him. "I don't know her name, but she left this number to be called, and I have to get in touch with her. It's a matter of life and death, maybe."

He said: "Our hat check girl here's a blonde, and she's got a Chev convertible. She just started day before yesterday. That the one you mean?"

"Probably," I said. "Could I talk to her?"

"She doesn't come on until five."

"You got her home address?"

"Sure thing. But I don't know you, buddy. And I'm not handing out something like that over the phone."

"If you'll tell me the name of the place," I said, "I'll come down and prove to you that it's all right."

He told me the name of the place, and I went over. With some, the buzzer works, and with some it doesn't. I flashed it, just on the off chance, and it worked.

"Oh," he said, "a detective," and gave me the address.

It was a small, four apartment building on Ellsworth, near Hubbard. The blonde was home, and Mac was right. She was just another blonde. She told me what she meant by "if he isn't dead." That he would be within twelve hours, she had no way of knowing, then. And neither did I.

I spent the afternoon looking for Jack, and not finding him. I inquired at the residence of Alex Randolph and learned that the boss had gone out of town for the day, wasn't expected home until late tonight, and nobody at the house knew where he had gone. He was just "out of town."

Jack, I hoped, was out of town with him.

I went back to the office, but it was hot up there. I sat there for almost an hour, despite the heat, wondering if I'd get a phone call. I didn't, and the heat grew worse. From the north, I heard the rumble of thunder. We could use some rain.

I went to the window and saw the kids below. It didn't look much like rain, but you couldn't be sure. I hoped it would rain. I went over to Mac's.

I had a cheese sandwich and another beer and some words with Mac, but my heart wasn't in it. I was feeling sick. One thing I could do, I could work, but where would I start?

I went over to the tall apartment building, finally. There was a switchboard in the lobby. There was an operator here, who kept a record of all outgoing calls, because outgoing calls cost the tenants five cents a piece, and if the tenant complained, why, there was the number and here was the day you called it.

There was the number, on a couple of days.

They're so smooth, and then they overlook something as simple as this. They're so clever, and then they do the dumbest, damnedest things.

In a murder, it's best to be as impromptu as you can. It's the careful planning that trips you up.

And all the time that silly rhyme was running through my head.

I went home and took a shower. I tried to take a nap, but that was impossible. If Alex Randolph wouldn't be be home until late, there wasn't much I could do. At eight o'clock, I was on Doc Enright's front porch.

"Come in," he said. "Come in, as the spider said. I hope you brought some money or your checkbook."

"Both," I told him. "How's Ella?"

"Ella's fine. She and Aunt Aggie went to a movie. That was all right, wasn't it?"

I said it was all right, and we went down to the basement, to the rumpus room.

The boys were all there, all of them a lot wealthier than yours truly, but all of them played this quarter limit game as though it meant milk for their starving children.

I played it, that night, as though I didn't care if I won or lost. So naturally, I won. Doc was about the only guy who bucked me successfully that night, and on the really big pots I beat him out. I was nearly fifty bucks ahead when Aunt Aggie came down and told me I was wanted upstairs.

GLEN HARVEY was waiting for me up there. "We found Ed Byerly," he said. "We've been looking all over town for you and Jack. I had a hunch you might be here. I remembered your Tuesday nights."

"Where'd you find Byerly?" I asked.

"In a vacant lot. His face was bloody, as though he'd had a batle with some-

one, but we got him cleaned up now. He was strangled, Jonesy."

"He's—"

"Dead," Glen finished. "Jack here? We want him down at the morgue to identify Byerly as the killer, if he is."

From below, I heard the voices of the boys. "Byerly isn't the killer," I said. "I'll go with you now, and we'll wait for Jack. He should be back in town pretty soon."

"What the hell's he doing out of town?" Glen asked. "The Chief won't like that."

"He's chasing a wild goose," I said. "Let's go."

It's an ill wind, I thought. This is the first time in months I've been able to leave here, money ahead.

We took the department car. Glen said: "There's one bloody thumbprint on Byerly's collar, but it doesn't check with anything in the files."

I said nothing. The thunder was really rumbling now, in the north, and there was a damp breeze blowing in the sedan window. Clouds overhead blanketed the moon and stars completely. It was a depressing, miserable night, a night to match my mood.

Glen said: "Devine's got the screaming meemies. He thinks you guys are hiding out on purpose."

I told him what I thought of Devine. I said: "This is a nasty racket we're all in, Glen."

"It's a living," he said.

We didn't go over to Jack's rooming house to wait. We parked near Alex Randolph's big home, and turned off the lights.

Glen said: "I'm not the only one working overtime. The Chief's waiting down at headquarters, too, Jonesy."

"And Devine, no doubt?"

"And Devine." He peered through the gloom. "Is that a filling station open up there?"

"It looks like it," I said.

"I'd better run up and call in, tell them what we're doing. You wait here." He left the car.

I waited, while the thunder grew worse, while the wind rose. Then, as the first drops of rain spattered against the windshield, Glen was back. "They'll be waiting down there," he said.

We didn't wait long, though it seemed long. The rain was falling steadily when a huge sedan rolled up the street and turned in at the Randolph home.

About twenty second later, another pair of headlights came down the street. Glen looked at me for confirmation.

They were old, dim lights, and Jack's car was a jalopy. I took a chance. "That's Jack," I said.

Glen stepped out into the center of the road. I wasn't far behind him.

The jalopy ground to a halt, and Jack's head came out the side window. "What the hell's cooking?" he wanted to know.

"Murder," I said.

Glen was over at the car now. "Ed Byerly's been killed. They want you down to identify him."

"O.K.," Jack said, "let's go. But don't stand out there in the rain like that."

"You'd better come in the department car," Glen said. "This heap of yours doesn't look like it'd make it."

"Hmmm," Jack said. "That showcase of Randolph's couldn't lose me. And he was really logging."

On the way down, I asked Jack: "What'd you find out about Alex Randolph?"

"After thirteen hours of constant supervision by this trained and skilled operative," Jack said, "it was learned that Alex Randolph, brother of the deceased, owns a fox farm."

"And that's all?"

"That's all. Foxes, hundred of foxes, and I'll bet he'll take a beating, the way furs have been dropping, lately. But that's all I learned."

I said nothing more. I hadn't anything fitting to say.

Glen said: "You guys sure love to play cop, don't you? And without pay. It beats me."

"With pay," I said. *But without reward,* I thought. *Money isn't enough to pay me for this, tonight.*

Lightning split the sky, and the rain was really lashing the windows now.

Jack said: "I really should phone the blonde. She worries about me."

"Women," Glen said. "You can have 'em all."

"I'll take 'em," Jack said. "How about you, Jonesy?"

"Some of them are all right, I guess," I said.

We were in front of the station, now. The morgue was in the basement, the cool, dim morgue.

WE WENT in, hurrying to get out of the rain, but I didn't want to hurry. We went down the worn, stone steps, and past Doc Waters, who was bending over one of the slabs. Doc Waters worked late, too, it seemed.

Then we came to a slab, and Glen pulled the sheet down, and Jack stared. We waited.

Finally, Jack said: "That's different than the picture all right. That's him, for sure."

He wasn't there again, today, I thought, *Oh gee, I wish he'd go away.* The silly, silly rhyme.

Glen said: "We'll go up to the Chief's office."

We went up slowly, thinking our separate and various thoughts. Mine weren't pleasant.

Devine was in the Chief's office, and so was the Chief. The Chief said: "Well . . .?"

"That's the man," Jack said.

Devine smirked, and the Chief nodded. "All right, we'll have a statement prepared in a moment. If you gentlemen will sit down?"

We sat down. I said: "Never mind the statement."

They were all staring at me. I thought of the rhyme. "He's the little man who wasn't there. I know that. Byerly was miles away from Dr. Randolph's office when the doctor was killed."

Devine snorted. The Chief said: "You sure of that, Mort?"

I could feel Jack's eyes on me. "I'm sure of it. There were lots of little, fat men involved in this case. None of them were there."

Jack said: "Are you crazy, Jonesy?"

"I went to see your girl today, Jack," I said. "She thought you might be dead. *She hasn't seen you for a week.*"

He started to say something, and stopped.

"Some girl must have been seeing you," I went on. "You couldn't go a week without some babe, could you."

He was looking at the floor.

"I checked Mrs. Randolph's outgoing calls," I said. "Quite a few of them were to you, Jack. That thumbprint on Byerly's collar is probably yours. Did he threaten you?"

He nodded, his eyes still directed toward the floor.

"What the hell—" Glen Harvey said.

"Dr. Randolph had these spells," I said. "There wasn't any danger to his life, really, but he thought there was. That was a nice set-up for a guy needing an angle. Lots of *previous* suspects. In the week we guarded the doctor, Jack met his wife. That would be a mutual attraction. Jack's got all he'll ever need, where women are concerned. And Mrs. Randolph will have all the money Jack will ever need, once the doctor is dead. Love at first sight, to use the polite phrasing. But Jack made a mistake."

I went on, hating myself. "Jack remembered a phrase Byerly had used, one time when he came to milk the doctor. That's the words he put in the non-existent fat man's mouth—'Just tell the doctor his conscience is here.' When Byerly saw that in the paper, he thought Jack was trying to frame him; he could guess that Jack was the killer, himself. Byerly had an alibi, but he couldn't find her. When did he come to see you, Jack?"

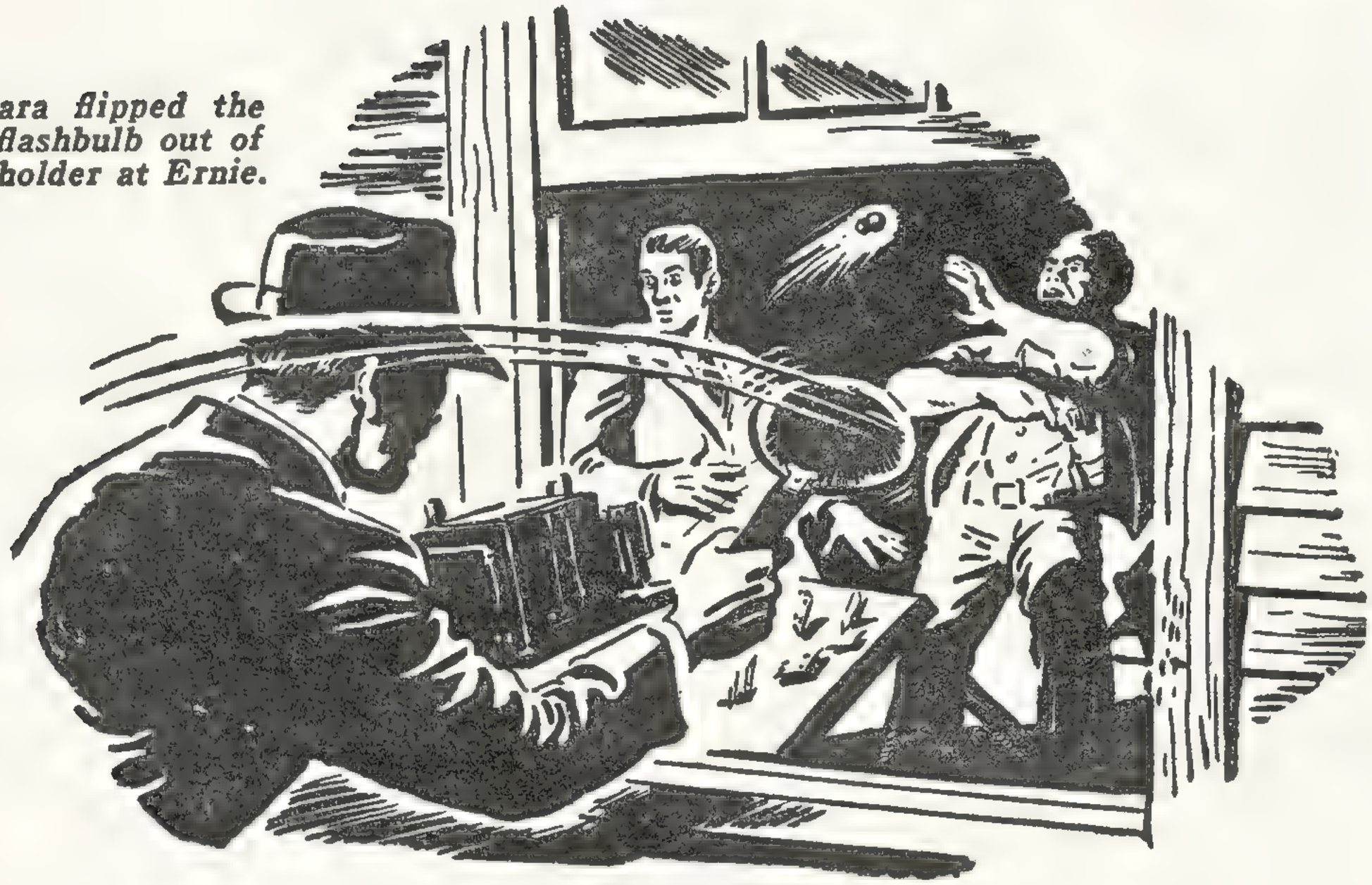
His voice was just a whisper. "Last night. He knew about Jean and me, too. He'd been watching the doctor pretty close, and he saw Jean and me, together."

Jean was Mrs. Randolph.

It got through to Devine, finally. "You mean, there never was a little fat man? Jack did the knife work, when the girl was out to lunch?"

(Continued on page 129)

Murder's



O'Hara flipped the hot flashbulb out of the holder at Ernie.

CHAPTER ONE

Hotel Homicide

THE four men in 907 didn't look to O'Hara like members of the Loyal Order of Bears, and, having had two days of press-agenting the L.O.B. convention for the Hotel Diplomat, O'Hara felt he was an expert on the subject of Bears.

The quartet, in his opinion, looked much more like characters in whom the District Attorney's racket squad would be much interested.

There was a fat man with eyes cut out of polished green rock who sat in a chair by the windows and mopped sweat from the rolls at the back of his neck. There was a wiry young man, very elegant in thin black mustache and tropical white suit. He leaned against a bureau and eyed O'Hara with a cold but interested stare. Astride a straight chair, his arms hugging the back, was a small man, jockey size, who had pink cheeks and crisp graying hair against a background of plaid suit and very yellow shoes. The fourth man lounged on the bed and gazed across one narrow shoulder at the doorway without a recognizable emotion on his dark square face or in his small, dusty-black eyes. He was in his shirt sleeves and his vest, sagging, showed the brown leather strap of a shoulder holster.

The wiry man kept staring at O'Hara and at the open door behind O'Hara. He

A Kenny O'Hara Novelette

NO LIBEL

By H. H. STINSON

said: "And what can we do for you?"

"Excuse it, please," O'Hara said. He flipped a large hand in a deprecatory gesture and his brown, rugged face was apologetic. "I'm looking for a photographer. A photog named Clancy. I see he isn't here."

The jockey-sized man giggled, said in a high-pitched voice: "He's just looking for a photog named Clancy."

"What made you think he'd be in here?" said the fat man. He had a husky, rolling voice and his belly moved when he talked.

"Clancy," O'Hara said, "is the kind of a guy who is every place except where he's supposed to be."

The dark man on the bed rolled over, got his feet on the floor while the wiry man by the bureau said: "When you want to find Clancy, I suppose you just go around knocking on doors?"

O'Hara grinned a little. "With a convention on and drinks in every room, it's the only sure way. As a matter of fact, one of the hops said he'd seen Clancy on this floor. Thanks, fellows, and excuse me for intruding."

The dark man said: "Wait a minute, friend." He moved fast but with an elusive appearance of taking his time and put himself between O'Hara and the doorway.

"Take it easy, Ernie," said the fat man.

"I wanta find out who this guy is."

"That's an easy one," said O'Hara. "I'm press agent for the Diplomat."

"A newspaper guy, huh?" said Ernie.

O'Hara smiled a little wryly. "Real newspapermen would give you an argument about that."

The dusty-black eyes rested on O'Hara with a sort of chill speculation. O'Hara didn't think he had anything to worry about but, even so, the man's blank, unimpassioned stare brought a faint breath of menace into the silent room.

Ernie put out a hand toward the door to close it but before his fingers touched the knob a very small man appeared in the frame of the doorway. He had the face of an elderly dyspeptic monkey and his brown suit was sloppy, stained in front with hypo. That was Clancy

Kenny O'Hara, new press agent for the Hotel Diplomat, was doing a bang-up job. In his very first week, with a mere murder to work on, he was getting the hostelry's name in all the local rags. Wonderful publicity—if only they catered to a clientele of corpses!

and Clancy was no drunker than he had been two hours before, which was pretty drunk. But, drunk or sober, he knew what to do with a camera.

He said in a fast, nearly undecipherable mumble: "Heard you were paging me, Kenny. 'Nother picture, huh? O.K., boys—just look pretty."

The camera which had been dangling in his right hand was up in front of his face before he'd finished his mumble. The flash bulb in its holder spat a white flare of light into the room and Clancy said: "Thank you, boys, thank you and thank you," and was already weaving backward into the hall.

It had all happened so fast that none of the four men had made a move. But O'Hara did. He took two long steps, said, "So long, fellows," as he went through the door. He pulled the door shut after him, grabbed Clancy by one pipe-stem arm and hauled him along the corridor toward the elevator.

Clancy said: "Cripes, Kenny, what's the hurry? We got the rest of the afternoon to make pix and me, I can shoot pix so fast you think my flashbulbs is a guy with a lantern running behind a picket fence. Why, once when I am on the Omaha *Bee*, I established a world's record by shooting two hundred pix at the livestock show in one day."

A down elevator showed yellow light behind the glass squares in the door and O'Hara said: "What'd the *Bee* do—award you the Blue Ribbon?"

HE WAS thinking that if he was only still with the Los Angeles *Tribune* and not a hotel press agent, he could have some fun with that picture. Four hot lads from somewhere didn't get together in a hotel room out on the Coast without there being a Page One story in it. But when you were a hotel press agent, you didn't put out stories on your hotel like that; you got the picture developed and turned it over to the cops and the cops either tossed the guys in the can without undue publicity or else ran them out of town in the same way.

O'Hara had quit the *Tribune* a week before but it already seemed like a month. It was a swell job he had now; a hundred and fifty bucks a week and regular hours and a hotel room and half-rate meals thrown in made a reporter's job look like small change.

It was a swell job, all right; only it wasn't fun.

They got down to the lobby and stepped out into a mob of eddying, sweating, convention-enjoying humanity.

O'Hara said: "Look, Clancy, can you stay put right by the newsstand for five minutes?"

"You don't have to worry about me," said Clancy. "I'm always around."

"Yeah," O'Hara said. "But where? I've had the newly-elected officers rounded up twice and lost 'em each time because I had to hunt you. I'm going to do it again and if you're missing this time, Mister Clancy, I'll drown you in a tray of your own developer."

Clancy looked at Miss Melba, the girl behind the newsstand, with drunken admiration. "Don't worry about me leaving here—I like that blond scenery."

O'Hara bumped, threaded, elbowed his way through the jammed lobby. He found the new president in the barber shop, just winding up a manicure. He dug two vice-presidents and a recording secretary out of the coffee shop; he hauled the membership secretary and the treasurer out of a crap game in Room 301. And he shooed them all toward Room A, off the ballroom.

He went back to the lobby. A small, trim girl with wide-set hazel eyes and a quirk to her mouth intercepted him.

She said: "Hi, space grabber!"

O'Hara said severely: "Public relations counsel to you, Miss Ames."

Tony Ames said: "How goes it, Ken?"

"Swell, kitten. This job is the nuts."

She looked at him shrewdly, shook her head. "You can take your hair down with mama. You hate the job, don't you? It's put more wrinkles in your forehead in a week than you got in seven years at the *Trib*. Why don't you come back with us, Ken?"

"And have that gang down there give

me the horse-laugh for a year? Braddock told me it wouldn't be a month before I'd sneak up to him at the city desk and beg for my job back. Anyway, this is a swell deal I have here. How about dinner here with me tonight, kitten? You can eat twice as much as usual on account of I get half rates."

"O.K., mule. But business before calories." From her pocketbook she took the Diplomat press release that O'Hara had sent out the previous night. She said: "I note that this dive of yours—"

Interrupting, O'Hara made a grimace of horror. "Please, please—the Diplomat is not a dive. At the very worst, it's only a joint. Proceed."

"Staying at the Diplomat dump is one Rex Miller of Midland City, who is—in your words—a noted gang buster. What gang did he ever bust?"

"There's a great story in him, angel face," said O'Hara. "It seems that back in Midland City vice has been rampant, as the editorial writers would say. So the good citizens, including most of the ministers in town, formed a committee to force the city administration to clamp down and kick the racket boys out. Not long after that, one of the ministers on the committee got into his car, stepped on the starter and was blown to bits. That was carrying things a bit too far. The state attorney general stepped in and appointed a special prosecutor to handle the investigation. Rex Miller is that individual. You ought to get a swell interview out of him. By 'swell' I mean one that mentions the Diplomat at least three times."

"Braddock said two hundred words and the Diplomat gets one mention if it doesn't slip my mind. Why is Miller out here?"

"He mentioned something about visiting a sister who's at college out here. Come on—I'll try to locate him for you." He turned, took a few steps and stopped. A lean and youngish man was edging his way through the crowd. He had a bony face, curt lips, a good jaw and a clear direct gaze. It all added up to a not unpleasant total. O'Hara said: "There's the lad now."

With Tony trailing him, O'Hara angled across the lobby and intercepted the lean, youngish man. "Mr. Miller—"

Miller halted, faced around. "Hello, O'Hara."

O'Hara did the introductions and Tony Ames said: "We've heard about your fine work in Midland City, Mr. Miller. If you have a little time—"

The curt-lipped young man glanced at his wrist watch, seemed for a moment hesitant. Then he said: "I can give you only a very few minutes. Let's find a spot out of this traffic."

Tony clicked high heels alongside Miller toward an alcove and O'Hara turned and jammed his way over to the newsstand to collect Clancy. Clancy wasn't there.

"Hell's bells," said O'Hara. He bit off other words that might—or might not—have shocked the newsstand blonde. "Where is that guy, Melba?"

Melba said: "Who—Clancy?"

"Yeah, where's Clancy?"

A fat man who was buying cigars seemed to think this was very humorous. He chuckled, sending out a wave of bourbon fog, and said: "It sounds like Clancy's missing, friends."

Melba said: "He was here a minute ago, Ken. Wait a second." She waved at a passing bellboy, sang out: "Mike, where's Clancy?"

The fat drunk thought that was even funnier. He said: "Lemme find Clancy for you, sister." He raised his voice and it wasn't a small voice. "Where's Clancy?" he yelled.

Somebody over on the other side of the lobby thought it was funny, also. He yelled back: "Where's Clancy?"

A LOT more of the delegates decided they had something there and wanted to know where Clancy was and inside of thirty seconds the idea had captured most of the conventioneers in the lobby as something screamingly comic.

"Where's Clancy?" they demanded separately in chorus.

Melba held her hands over her ears and grimaced at O'Hara.

Dahlman, the assistant manager, popped out of his office near the newsstand. He was a dandified, precise little man and he looked as though the noise was tearing his nerves into little strips. He shouted: "What is this? What's going on? Who started this pandemonium?"

Melba pointed mutely at O'Hara and Dahlman screamed above the din: "What do you mean, O'Hara, by starting an uproar like this?"

O'Hara scowled at the pretty little man and said: "Nuts, Mr. Dahlman, I didn't—"

"And is that any way to speak to your superior?"

A bellhop erupted from the jam and said: "Hey, O'Hara, I seen Clancy."

"Where?"

"He was going downstairs to the men's lounge with a guy about five minutes ago, a kinda hard-looking mug. He was carrying his plate case and camera."

O'Hara said, "Thanks, kid," and ducked around the newsstand, leaving Dahlman with his mouth open ready to say more.

The stairs to the washroom went down in smooth, marble terraces besides the elevator shaft. O'Hara had a hunch and he took the marble steps three at a time.

He slapped the leather-padded swing doors out of the way and went into the outer room of the lounge. There wasn't anyone there, not even Hamfoot, the shoeshine boy.

He slammed through a second set of leather-padded doors and there were three guys there. One of them was Clancy, who didn't seem to know or care where he was. He was on his back with his head beneath one of the washbowls. Blood and saliva drooled out of his open mouth.

Ernie, the dark-faced man from 907, was crunching photographic plates under one heel very deliberately and methodically. He had already kicked Clancy's camera to bits.

Hamfoot trembled and jittered in one corner and his black face was a pale gray.

Ernie looked coldly at O'Hara as he crunched the last plate on the floor. He had a gun in his hand and he said: "Hello, press agent. Get the hell outa my way!"

The dark-faced man apparently had been accustomed for a long time to the respect a gun should command. He took it for granted that O'Hara would get out of the way so he walked toward him, toward the door. O'Hara did step aside. But when Ernie came even with him, he kicked the gun out of Ernie's hand in one fast whirl of movement, using the follow-through of the kick to bring his right popping at the swarthy jaw. The right went high, smacking Ernie on the temple; but it had enough steam to slam him against the wall.

O'Hara felt pretty sore about things. He didn't like little Clancy being knocked around and he didn't like guys to put guns on him. But, most of all, he was sore about trying and trying to get that picture of the new L.O.B. officers and never getting it.

Ernie bounced off the wall, spun into the swing doors and catapulted into the outer room of the lounge. The doors swung shut again and O'Hara dived for the gun, came back at the doors. When he got them out of his way, the dark-faced man had vanished up the stairs.

O'Hara didn't follow him. Ernie had a head start and if O'Hara did grab the guy in the lobby, it might start a riot in which hotel patrons could get hurt. A hotel press agent had to think of those things.

He went back in to Clancy and pulled him from under the washbowl. Hamfoot, still a pale gray, got a towel wet wordlessly and draped it over Clancy's forehead.

Clancy stirred and sat up. He scowled at O'Hara, said: "Where am I?"

"That," O'Hara growled, "is what everybody was asking a few minutes ago."

"Now I remember—a guy socked me. By cripes, I hope I catch him sometime." Clancy's look was ferocious and he waggled a skinny fist at the end of his pipestem arm. "If I catch him—"

"You'll be unlucky twice in the same place. Why'd you waltz down here with him?"

"He comes up to me at the newsstand and shows me he has his hand on a gun in his pocket. Then he makes me get my plate case and my box and brung me down here and socked me." Clancy looked around. "Hey, Kenny, look what he done to my stuff!"

"Where's the plate you shot in 907?"

Clancy spat blood out of his mouth. "You think the guy was after that one?"

"I don't think it, I know it."

Clancy chuckled. "The guy is outa luck. I left that one and a couple others I shot since lunch at the newsstand."

"Make me a print as fast as possible. Can you walk?"

"Can I walk! Say, Kenny, I took a lot worse beatings than that and still got my pix in. Why, one time I am on the Denver *Post*—"

"Sure, sure, Clancy." O'Hara got the little man to his feet, got him started out.

Hamfoot pointed at the gun, which O'Hara had laid atop a cabinet. "You forgettin' you gun, Mist' O'Hara."

"Not mine," said O'Hara. "Maybe the owner'll be back for it and you can give it to him—across his dome."

O'Hara and Clancy went up the stairs. There wasn't any sign of the dark-faced man in the thronged lobby.

The cries of "Where's Clancy?" had given way to the strains of the convention pep song in half-a-dozen keys. Everyone—that is, almost everyone—was happy.

The exception was the bellhop who skated across the lobby, skidded to a stop before O'Hara. He was goggle-eyed.

He said, keeping his voice down: "Geez, O'Hara, a moider!"

"A what?"

"A moider—a dead guy on the ninth floor. Dahlman wants you up there fast. He's gone up with the dicks and he said you was to keep the reporters from knowing about it."

CHAPTER TWO

Closeted With a Corpse

THE jockey-sized man was curled up at the bottom of the ninth-floor linen closet where a horrified maid had discovered him some fifteen minutes before. Kneeling beside the body, O'Hara saw, was Lieutenant Lenroot of Central Homicide. Lenroot unbuttoned the little man's vest, lifted away a folded hotel towel from the shirtfront. Both towel and shirtfront were blood soaked.

Lenroot unbuttoned the shirt, using the towel to wipe away blood. "Stabbed dead center in the ticker," he said. "Probably in one of the rooms on this floor."

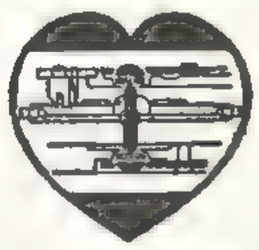
Dahlman objected shrilly. "You mean you're going to intrude on our guests, Lieutenant? Why, we have eighty rooms

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on this floor—I won't have you disturbing our guests like that!"

Lenroot said: "Don't worry. We'll handle everything nice." He checked the little man's pockets, found nothing got up off his knees. "Any idea who he is, Mr. Dahlman?"

"I never saw him before."

O'Hara said: "I—"

Dahlman whipped around, noticed O'Hara for the first time. He shook a ladylike finger, said: "You certainly took your time getting up here, O'Hara. After this, when I send for you, you come hopping."

Lenroot showed long yellow teeth in a grimace at O'Hara. He was a large stomachy man with a long, pale face and pale eyes. He said: "What're you doing here, O'Hara? I thought you were out of the newspaper racket and—after many years—out of my hair."

"He's doing publicity for us," Dahlman said. "I sent for you, O'Hara, to say that you positively must keep this thing away from the reporters—"

He broke off and stared past O'Hara, moaned softly: "Oh, my goodness, my goodness!"

O'Hara turned and there were five reporters and two photogs barging around the angle of the corridor, bearing down on them. Mason, the house dick, was borne along helplessly in their midst.

Kendall of the *Times* was in the lead and he chortled happily: "O'Hara, you're a hotel press agent as is a press agent—you give us a swell murder in your first week here!"

Dahlman sputtered up at O'Hara: "You did that?"

"Did what?"

"You tipped off these reporters! Why, you—you—"

O'Hara might have had a chance to straighten matters out if at that moment it hadn't occurred to Clancy that his contribution was needed. He shoved between O'Hara and Dahlman.

He waggled a puny fist in Dahlman's face, growled: "Pull up your panty-waist, sister. You can't shove my pal around."

At that Dahlman went to pieces in earnest. He screamed: "You're fired, Clancy. And you, O'Hara, you're fired, too. Get out—get out! Both of you! Before I go crazy!"

Clancy said consolingly: "Well, sister, you ain't got far to travel."

Back of O'Hara the reporters guffawed and Dahlman wrung his hands, quivered. He darted a finger at O'Hara, at Clancy, and said hotly: "Lieutenant, get these men out of here. Get them out, please."

Lenroot grinned at O'Hara. He said: "It'll be a pleasure, Mr. Dahlman, a positive pleasure."

He got O'Hara's arm in a hard grip, grabbed Clancy by the shoulder. He said: "On your way, bums."

O'Hara said hotly: "Listen, you fathead—"

"Nah," said Lenroot. "I don't have to listen. Get going. I been waiting a long time, O'Hara, to put you in your place."

O'Hara's eyes were humid, red was creeping up the back of his neck. He said: "If you'll give your ears a chance instead of your mouth—"

Lenroot was marching them down the hall and he said: "When you had the *Tribune* behind you, I had to listen to your gab. But you're just a tramp out of a job now. Shut up and scram!"

Clancy said: "You want me to take a poke at this mug, Kenny?"

O'Hara suddenly shrugged, stopped resisting Lenroot's hand. He said: "O.K., Lenroot, but you're going to regret this."

"Yeah," Lenroot grinned. He got them to the stairs and shoved and O'Hara skidded down two steps and Clancy went rubber-kneed down six steps to a landing. Lenroot dusted his hands and said: "Don't let me catch you guys around up here any more. Goombye, O'Hara, and thanks for the most pleasure I've had since the first time I met you."

He went back along the corridor.

Clancy said: "Come on, Kenny, leave you and me go back there and bounce that guy off the floor."

O'Hara shook his head, came down the stairs to the landing, saying nothing.

His face was dour, tight-muscled at the corners of the jaw and his eyes were dark and angry.

Clancy said: "Don't take it so hard, Kenny. Hell, I been fired off lots better jobs than this. I been fired off the St. Looie *Post-Dispatch*, the Cincy *Inquirer*, the Newark *Ledger*, the Frisco *Chronicle*, the Atlanta *Constitution*, the—"

O'Hara managed a grin. "Quit bragging."

"No kidding, I been fired off—"

"Never mind. Where can you develop that shot you took in 907?"

"Right in the hotel darkroom I can do it."

"We don't work for the hotel. Remember?"

"I know a commercial photog over on Hope Street. I can use his joint."

"Go to it. And make me three prints. I'll be around the hotel waiting for you."

CLANCY went away and O'Hara remained, an island of silent thoughtfulness in the sea of noise that was the lobby. Presently he made his way to the desk; he figured that the news that he had been fired wouldn't have reached there yet. He was right.

A glossy-haired clerk readily acceded to a request for information on 907. "Certainly, O'Hara. The occupant of Room 907 was a Mr. W. J. Herman of Seattle."

"Was?"

The clerk nodded. "He turned in his key and paid his bill not ten minutes ago."

"What'd he look like?"

"A rather stout man. In fact, I might say very fat."

"Thanks," said O'Hara.

At the Diplomat the motor entrance is a floor below the lobby and the stairs that reach it are across the wide expanse from the desk. O'Hara fought his way slowly through the convention crowds and reached the top of the stairs.

He saw the angular brisk back of Rex Miller of Midland City halfway down the flight. Miller was hurrying, his well-shined black shoes twinkling from step to step. O'Hara matched his hurry, although not with the thought of wasting any time on Miller at the moment. If Mr. W. J. Herman of Seattle had checked out only ten minutes before, it was possible that he'd still be at the motor entrance, waiting for a cab. O'Hara didn't know exactly what he'd do about it if that was so; but at least he could note the number of the cab and talk to the hacker later.

O'Hara swore at Lenroot silently. If Lenroot hadn't been such a jerk and hadn't roused O'Hara's Irish, the fat man could have been grabbed before he so much as tried to check out. O'Hara swore at himself, too. He could have handled the big homicide dick if the O'Hara temper hadn't slipped its leash.

Miller turned into the corridor that opened onto the motor court and for a moment was out of sight. O'Hara got to the corridor and halted abruptly. The special prosecutor from Midland City had stopped just inside the doorway and was in earnest but hurried consultation with the wiry young man whom O'Hara had last seen in 907.

The tableau lasted no more than a few seconds. Miller nodded and stepped to the sidewalk. The wiry young man followed.

A low, pale-green Cadillac, driven by Ernie, the dark-faced man, slid into view and stopped. The fat man, who was Mr. Herman of Seattle—at least, on the Diplomat register—was in the front seat beside Ernie. O'Hara saw Rex Miller reach for the rear door of the Cad, open it. Miller climbed into the car quickly, the wiry young man popped in after him. The Cad rolled away.

O'Hara got to the curb in time to see the Cad swinging around the corner of the boxwood hedge outlining the motor court. He got a glimpse of an Illinois license plate, a glimpse that gave him only two of the numbers, and then the Cad was gone.

He went back and up the stairs toward the lobby and the telephone booths. He was thinking about Lieu-

tenant Lenroot whose face was going to be very red when he saw in the *Tribune* the 907 picture and read that one Rex Miller, special prosecutor in the Midland City case, had driven hurriedly away from the Diplomat with three prize suspects in the linen-closet killing.

He knew that Lenroot would try to land on him like a ton of brickbats for holding out. O'Hara had the comeback for that one, something about leading a mule to the information trough but not being able to force the mule to have any.

Wedging himself into a phone booth, he dialed the number of the *Tribune* and got through to the city desk.

A crisp, brusque voice said: "Hello, hello."

O'Hara said: "Brad, this is Ken O'Hara."

At the other end of the wire Braddock began to laugh. "Well, hello, black sheep. I hear you got fired."

"O.K., I got fired."

"I gave you a month to lose the spot and you made it in a week and now I suppose you want your job back." He laughed again.

"That's right—laugh!"

"O.K., boy, I'm laughing and I don't know why I shouldn't. I told you not to take that job, I said you were a reporter and not a press agent but, no, you knew it all and Uncle Braddock could go jump in the lake. And now you come around begging for your job back—"

O'Hara said hotly: "Who said I was begging for my job?"

"Oh, you don't want it back?"

"I didn't say that."

Braddock had been burned when O'Hara had walked out on him. He still sounded burned. He said: "When you make up your mind, come around and see me. Right now, Irish, I'm busy."

The line went dead in O'Hara's ear and he said under his breath, but not very far under: "Then nuts to you, too."

He had pronged the receiver and was stepping out of the booth as he said it, practically into the face of a pompous man with roached gray hair who stood waiting.

The pompous man said indignantly: "I beg your pardon, sir?"

O'Hara muttered: "Sorry. Just send the nuts back."

O'Hara moved off through the lobby toward the entrance of the cocktail room and the pompous man decided the fellow must be crazy or drunk or both and let it go at that.

O'HARA was making wet, moody circles on the bar with his highball glass when Tony Ames found him thirty minutes later. He gave her a windy, up-from-under look.

She said: "You don't have to bite me, too. I'm sorry, Ken. And if you want me to, I'll go kick Mr. Dahlman in the face."

O'Hara managed a grin. "Excuse, kitten. Let's park and I'll buy you a drink."

They found a booth and ordered, O'Hara's Scotch being his third. He stared at the table for seconds, finally said: "What I hate about that guy, Braddock, is he's always right. He said I was ruining a fair reporter to make a lousy press agent and, by God, that's just what I did. I guess it turned me into a mouse, Tony. I let that daisy-chain assistant manager fire me and then Lenroot gave me the bum's rush and just a while ago Braddock had me back on my heels. And, cripes, I couldn't think of a comeback to any of them."

Tony Ames' wide-spaced hazel eyes were sorry. "Aw, cheer up, Ken."

"I'll cheer up when I get my self-respect back. And, kitten, I'll get it back."

"You're silly to let it get you down."

"Quit trying to buck me up, Miss Ames. I'm not going to be a happy Irishman until I've made more of a monkey out of Lenroot than he made out of me—and until Brad begs me to come back. And, by cripes, I'll put it over."

Tony looked interested. "You mean on this Diplomat murder?"

O'Hara grinned. "That, you *Tribune*

minion, would be telling. You working on it?"

"I was up there helping Shep Carter from the police beat for a while."

"Lenroot getting anywhere?"

"He hadn't up to the time I left. There was no identification on the body. None of the hotel employees questioned so far had seen the man before, with the exception of an elevator operator who said he took him to eight early in the afternoon." She stopped and then said slowly: "Ken, you know things about this murder that you're not telling."

For a moment O'Hara didn't answer. Then he said: "Tony, I'm going to put you in a spot I've been in many times. If I tell you something in confidence, I know you're not going to violate my confidence by tipping off Brad or the cops. I know a little something about this killing. I'm going to find out more and then I'm going to hang it on Brad and Lenroot like a horsecollar on a jackass."

Tony looked worried. She said: "Ken, this is a murder. Do you think you ought to hold out?"

"Hold out?" said O'Hara. "Hold out? All afternoon I've been trying to tell those two guys what I know. And what do I get out of it? Insults, a kicking around!"

Tony sighed: "Some time I'd like to find an Irishman who could be sore but sensible."

"He died and went to heaven a thousand years ago."

Clancy peered in at the entrance of the cocktail room and O'Hara got up. He said: "I'll be seeing you, kitten."

"Uh-huh," said Tony, smiling a little.

He went out and herded Clancy to the comparative quiet of an alcove. There he studied one of the prints that Clancy produced. The little photog hadn't lied; drunk or sober he could shoot swell pix and this sample was no exception.

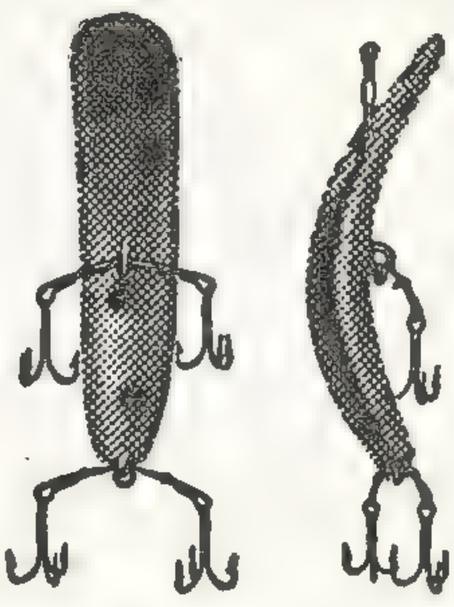
The fat man was in the center like a Buddha in a sweat-stained shirt. The wiry mustached man lounged gracefully against the bureau and Ernie was frozen into a pose of startled motion. The jockey-sized man grinned straight into the camera and O'Hara thought it a little ironic that he seemed the happiest guy in the picture and had wound up dead within minutes of that moment.

The picture supplied other details that O'Hara hadn't noticed when he'd been in 907 because his attention had been occupied exclusively by four hot characters. The fat man's coat was hanging on a post of the bed and there was a folded newspaper sticking from one of the pockets. There were three empty beer bottles on the bureau and two unopened bottles. On the writing desk was a folded document of some sort. O'Hara thought he could distinguish lines and markings of some kind on it.

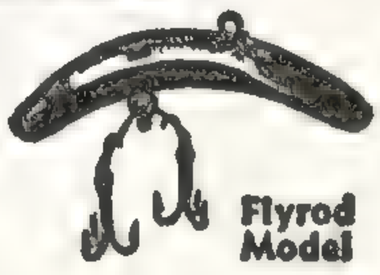
Even with his naked eyes, O'Hara could read the letters, *MIDLAND NEWS* at the top of the newspaper.

Clancy yawned. He was getting bored. He was also getting sober, which was

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worse. He said: "Leave us get a drink, Kenny."

"You go get one," O'Hara said.

Clancy ambled away and O'Hara headed for the corridor that housed a half-dozen specialty shops. In the jewelry shop O'Hara borrowed a jeweler's glass from the slinky brunette behind the counter. He screwed it into his eye and bent over the picture.

The indistinct lines on what had looked at first like a folded document jumped up blackly and O'Hara saw that it was not a document but a road map. A highway had been paralleled in crayon and the marking led to the town name "Alkali Center" near the edge of the fold.

O'Hara returned the glass to the slinky brunette and went back toward the lobby, more puzzled now than he had been before. In the beginning he hadn't seen any more to the killing of the jockey-sized man than a simple and sordid disagreement between thugs. It seemed apparent now that it stemmed somehow from the Midland City racket case. But how? And why had Rex Miller, special prosecutor in that case, waltzed off with three hoodlums, one of whom must certainly have committed the murder?

FOR a moment O'Hara toyed with the thought that the Midland City organization had put the snatch on the man who was fighting them. But, reconstructing the scene, O'Hara discarded the idea. Talking with the wiry man at the motor entrance, Miller had given no indication of being fearful or even startled; and, if he had been intercepted unexpectedly by the wiry man, he would at least have been startled. Too, he had hurried across the walk and climbed into the Cadillac with no hint of hesitancy or unwillingness.

It wasn't entirely unknown for a battle to be framed, for a state administration to pick a special prosecutor who'd put up just enough fight to make the public think something was being done about its troubles.

But that didn't explain the dead man on nine. Nor a road map marked as far as Alkali Center. Set in the middle of the bleak Mojave Desert, ringed in by hot rugged mountains as barren as the surface of the moon, the small town of Alkali Center would seem to hold little interest for racketeers from the lush civilized flatlands of the midwest.

O'Hara sat down at a writing desk, scribbled a few terse notes on a sheet of Diplomat stationery, sealed the notes and a print of the picture in an envelope. He wrote his name on the envelope, slipped it into his pocket and went to find Clancy.

He dug Clancy out of the barroom and together they headed for the basement garage where O'Hara's unwashed coupe sat like an unashamed leper among the proud and shiny cars of the Diplomat trade. Clancy didn't ask why; he just went along.

O'Hara said: "I'm taking a ride out into the desert, Clancy. I could use some help maybe."

"O.K., Kenny."

"There's maybe one chance in ten we might run into trouble. I just wanted you to know."

Clancy yawned. "Well, I got nothing else to do and I'd kinda like to see the desert. It must be the sheik in me."

"Got a camera to take the place of the busted one?"

"Yeah. Drive by my place and we'll pick it up."

They angled around an impressive town car and O'Hara pulled open the door of his coupe.

Tony Ames grinned at him from the seat. She said: "I'd been wondering how much longer you'd be."

"What's the idea?" O'Hara said. "If any."

Tony shrugged. "I haven't anything interesting to do tonight and—"

"Me, too," said O'Hara. "But we won't be doing anything interesting together tonight, kitten."

"Now look," said Tony firmly, "I can always tell when you're getting wound up to do something wacky. You get that Battle-of-the-Boyne look in your eyes. All right, let's go and do it and get it

off your mind and then you and Brad can kiss and make up and life can go on."

"I hadda babe like her once," Clancy observed. "She useta follow me around while I shot pix—she thought it was romantic. But I got rid of her."

"And how did you do that, little man?" said Tony.

"I married her and she got sick of looking at me and six weeks later ran away with a Marine. I think her name was Gladys."

O'Hara climbed under the wheel and Clancy climbed in at the other side of Tony Ames. O'Hara tooled the coupe out of the garage. He drove three blocks north and six blocks west and stopped in front of an apartment building.

He said: "Here's your hacienda, hon. Help the lady out, Clancy."

"I don't think I like you, O'Hara," said Tony. "You do this to me after all the stories we've worked on together."

O'Hara patted her hand. "This time it's different, Tony. You're working for Braddock. If you go out on this with me and don't report in, he'll fire you. If you do report in, you violate my confidence. Your place tonight is by your own fireside."

Tony gave in. When she was on the sidewalk she said: "I'll bet you'll be sorry. I'll bet before it's over you'll be wishing you had my help."

Clancy said: "Don't worry, babe. I'll take care of O'Hara."

"Sure," said Tony. "But who'll take care of you?"

CHAPTER THREE

Desert Party

THEY made two more stops in the city—one at Clancy's apartment to pick up his spare equipment and the other at Mike's Grill where O'Hara left the sealed envelope with Mike—and at midnight the coupe jogged along the desert highway under high, sharp and very quiet stars. For the last hundred miles O'Hara had pulled into every open filling station, of which there hadn't been very many, to check for a trace of the pale-green Cad. The Cad had been unreported by one and all.

O'Hara and Clancy hadn't talked for a long time. Now O'Hara broke the silence. He said reflectively: "Sometimes I think I'm nuts, Clancy."

"Don't worry about it, kid. The nicest guy I ever knew was a cop that cut his wife's throat."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Well, this guy had known for ten years he was loony but he was smart enough to fool everybody. Then one night his wife and him have a little argument and she says like a wife does, 'Oh, Albert, you're crazy' and he hops up and yells, 'You been peeking', and cuts her from ear to ear. He was a swell guy, everybody liked him."

"If I had sense," O'Hara said, "I'd have shoved that picture and as much information as I had down Braddock's throat and the cops could now be doing this job and I could be getting some sleep. But, no, I have to get sore."

"Uh-huh."

They drove on another mile. O'Hara demanded: "Well, I had a right to get sore, didn't I?"

"Sure, kid."

"Anyway, if I'd handed the picture to Braddock, he'd have printed it and that would have tipped off these guys that they're jammed. And if I'd given it to Lenroot first, it would have cost me the scoop I need to hang on Braddock."

Clancy yawned and settled down in the corner of the coupe. He said: "Whichever one of your personalities wins the argument, Kenny, wake me up and leave me know."

Presently they pulled into Alkali Center, roused a hotel proprietor and he yawned them to a cabin. At six in the morning O'Hara hauled Clancy out of the blankets into the chill morning air. Clancy complained that it was practically the middle of the night.

"Besides, Kenny, this desert ain't like I hear about deserts. It's an ice-box. I'm freezing."

"You'll warm up."

By nine o'clock O'Hara had covered the filling stations, garages, auto courts and restaurants of Alkali City without digging up any information about the pale-green Cad or its occupants. It was beginning to warm up as he and Clancy started out to cover the skein of desert roads radiating from the town.

When noon came O'Hara was at his tenth stop. He came out of a 'dobe shack beside an oldster who looked as though he had died, been dehydrated and then set in motion by springs and wheels inside his leathery skin. A sign above the shack said, *Jawbone Flats Super-Service.* One decrepit gas pump stood in front of the place.

The oldster said: "No, sir, I been on this spot twenty years and ain't seen such a Cadillac pass in all that time. Nor I ain't seen any of those hombres in that picture you showed me."

O'Hara patted sweat off his forehead with a handkerchief that was a damp ball. He said: "Thanks, Dad."

By now the desert was a huge hot mirror, reflecting the sunlight with a dazzling violence that assaulted the eyes and fried the brain. A mile away to the east there was a round cool-looking lake which O'Hara knew wasn't there because they had just come that way through a blistering desolation of rock, sand and greasewood. Beyond the nonexistent lake rose a range of barren, chocolate-brown mountains.

O'Hara climbed under the wheel and the dusty washboard of desert road began to flow toward them hotly. He said gloomily: "Hell, this could be a wild goose chase, Clancy. Those guys might be five hundred miles from here."

Clancy came feebly to life and muttered: "Yeah." He mopped sweat. "If I was running this desert, I would put in a saloon every quarter mile. With plenty cold beer, maybe a guy could stand it."

"Want to call it off."

"Nah—I still got a pint of blood to be dehydrated."

An hour later they were back in Alkali Center, pulling up before a green-fronted restaurant with a sign that said: *Hot Meals—Cold Drinks—Air Conditioning.*

Clancy climbed out, staggered around the sidewalk on rubber legs for a moment. He said: "If that sign don't tell the truth I'll sue."

INSIDE they chose a booth and Clancy expanded in the chilled air. A waitress came over and he said: "Just gimme some ice, sister—and pour bourbon around it."

O'Hara ordered beer and they both ordered steaks. While the drinks and the steaks were coming, Clancy said: "Kenny, it ain't like me to be curious but I been kinda wondering. Whatta we do if we catch up with these guys?"

"The first thing is to locate them if possible. Then we call in some desert law for a round-up. After that we try to dig out of them the who and the why of the hotel killing and just where the boy prosecutor stands in the whole business. If he stands where I suspect, it's a story that's going to shake some underpinnings back in Midland City."

"Do we run in circles out in this subdivision of hell until we find them?"

O'Hara shook his head moodily. "If we haven't cut their trail by evening, I'll have to crack loose with the picture and what information I have."

By the time they had finished the steaks the air-conditioning had Clancy's teeth chattering. He said: "Leave us get out where I can defrost."

They went out and sat in the coupe while O'Hara checked maps. All up and down the street they were the only humans who were foolish enough to be outside braving the heat. A liver-colored dog came around the corner, folded up in the shadow of the car and began to pant, a pink tongue lolling out at a mouth corner. The dog was too much for Clancy.

He panted like the dog and said: "I gotta go back in there and get a cold drink even if the air-conditioning freezes me stiff. Yell for me when you're ready."

He weaved back into the restaurant

and O'Hara concentrated on the map. He didn't seem to mind the heat so much any longer; he thought that probably his nerve ends had been destroyed by it. He was putting the maps back in their case when movement attracted his eyes.

He focused and saw that the movement was at the doorway of a liquor store at the end of the block. The door completed its outward swing. The wiry man he had last seen at the Diplomat emerged, climbed into a battered station wagon. The station wagon swung in a U-turn, went north on the highway and out of town.

O'Hara honked, looked toward the restaurant. Nothing happened. He climbed out, took long strides to the door and hauled it open. Clancy was not in sight. O'Hara muttered a comment on Clancy's ancestry and went back to the coupe. He got it rolling in the wake of the station wagon.

Angling away here and there from the highway as it ran arrow-straight across the desert were faintly-marked and little-used tracks that led to mining properties or homesteads. Given too much of a start, O'Hara knew, the wiry man could turn off on one of those and disappear again. Clancy would probably wonder why O'Hara had stranded him but he wouldn't worry too much if he was stranded close enough to a bar.

THE sun-bleached buildings of Alkali Center slid past and O'Hara hung the speedometer needle at sixty. Three miles ahead the station wagon was a crawling bug that jittered and shimmered in the heat ripples. O'Hara paced it, neither gaining nor dropping behind. Ten, fifteen miles drifted by.

The station wagon turned from the highway, began to raise a dustcloud that moved steadily across the wasteland toward the mountains. O'Hara slowed to a crawl and watched the dustcloud. He reached the twin ruts where the station wagon had turned off but he continued along the highway. If he could see the wiry man's dusty wake, the wiry man wouldn't miss one made by the coupe.

The cloud mounted higher ground and then stopped and disappeared at a spot that looked as though it might be from three to four miles off the highway. With the naked eye it was impossible to distinguish any habitation at that point but there must be something of the sort there. O'Hara pulled off the shoulder, stopped and checked his map. No county road was shown at that point, which indicated that the track gave access to some small mining property or homestead.

He debated the next move. There would be a township marshal or perhaps a deputy sheriff in Alkali Center. But it would take time to get back there, explain things and drive out again. Meanwhile the wiry man and his companions might be moving on. It would be smarter, O'Hara decided, to camp by the rathole and, if the rats ran, to run along with them.

A couple of centuries passed and finally the sun crept down to the jagged edge of mountains, suddenly took a dive the rest of the way. Fingers of darkness reached from the mountains and curved down onto the desert. At the far-off point where the dustcloud had dissolved, a yellow twinkle appeared.

O'Hara fiddled around with Clancy's camera under the shine of the dashlight, setting exposure and shutter opening. Having dragged news photogs around with him for a dozen years, he had a fair working knowledge of the box. But he'd rather have had Clancy handling it. He got set with plate holders, stuffed three flashbulbs in his pockets. He was a little regretful now that he'd left Ernie's gun in the Diplomat washroom.

But maybe it was just as well he didn't have it because guns sometimes got a guy into gunfights. All he wanted was a picture of Mr. Rex Miller of Midland City with the three characters—if such a scene offered itself. He drove back to within a quarter mile of the side road, walked the rest of the way to the turnoff and struck out toward the twinkle of yellow light.

At eight o'clock by the green gleam of

his wrist watch, he judged he was within a mile of the light, now a very defined square of orange in the blackness. O'Hara had cut that distance in half when twin lights, the night-eyes of an automobile, snapped on near the illumined window. They began to move, bore down directly on O'Hara.

He stepped off the track, crouched behind the circular bulk of a tumbleweed. A jackrabbit, startled from that cover, hopped out between the ruts, flopped his ears at the approaching lights and hopped away just in time to escape the wheels of the station wagon as it rushed by.

O'Hara was sure he could distinguish two figures in the car as its bulk blotted out briefly the star-dusted horizon. He swore softly; if one of the pair was Rex Miller all this heel-and-toe business across the desert would be largely wasted motion.

But at least someone was out there on the desert yet for the glowing window still hung in the night like a framed painting of light. O'Hara plodded closer and closer until he was beginning to distinguish things in the room beyond the window.

He could see Ernie, the dark-faced man, seated at one end of a table. The other end was hidden from O'Hara until he worked himself off the road so that he could see into the room at an angle. He made a rough pleased sound in the back of his throat. Miller was at the other end of the table and he was shuffling a deck of cards. He pushed the deck out to the dark-faced man for a cut, took it back and began to deal. O'Hara could see him speak, laugh.

It was a nice sociable scene, just the thing that O'Hara would have ordered for the picture of the month.

He began to circle the building, which was flat-roofed and sprawling, a typical desert structure. He came upon a small derrick and windlass, propped over the black mouth of a mine shaft. He rounded a corner and almost bumped into the pale-green Cad. He devoted his attention to the car long enough to loosen the valve cores in two tires and leave them flattened. If he had to leave in a hurry, at least they wouldn't be able to come after him any faster than their feet would carry them.

After that he hugged the wall of the building and worked his way slowly and silently to a point beside the lighted window.

Rex Miller's crisp voice said: "Gin!"

Ernie swore. "Damn if you don't have the damndest luck!"

Miller chuckled. "Science, my boy."

There was the crisp snap of cards being shuffled. Ernie said: "Pour us some drinks, pal, while I shuffle. This lousy desert makes a guy dry."

There was the click of glassware and O'Hara thought, this is it! He'd wanted to stall, to listen, to soak up any information they might drop in their conversation. But a picture like that was too good to lose, would be worth a thousand words he might overhear.

He slipped a bulb into the flashgun swiftly, fingered the shutter release, pivoted around to the window, holding the box chest high and at an angle to catch the whole table.

The flashbulb flared like lightning in the night.

The tableau was perfect. Rex Miller at the moment was pouring a drink in Ernie's glass. Ernie was flipping a card to Miller. They had the relaxed smiling appearance of a couple of pals whiling away an evening at gin rummy.

The pose held for the instant it took to register on the plate and then sprang to pieces.

Miller dropped the bottle and jerked his face, wide open at the jaws, around toward the window. Ernie spun his cards away and all in the same smooth motion went for his gun, kicked the chair away from him and whirled toward O'Hara.

O'Hara flipped the hot flashbulb out of the holder at Ernie. Ducking back from the window, he saw Ernie jerking away from the arc of the flashbulb. A gun went off inside the room.

O'Hara made the corner of the building, rounded it and broke into a crouching run that took him off into the black wilderness of sage and sand. He headed

for the highway, guided now and then by the swift passage of faraway sparks that were headlights.

He had put a quarter-mile between himself and the building when he saw the headlamps of the Cadillac go on. They went off again quickly. The Cad wasn't going to roll for a while.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hot Story

BRADDOCK came on the wire in the Los Angeles *Tribune* office a couple of hundred miles from the Alkali City phone booth into which O'Hara had squeezed himself. He was sore.

He said: "You fatheaded Fenian, what's the idea of you getting drunk and putting through collect long-distance calls to the *Tribune*? O'Hara doesn't work here any more. Remember?"

"I'm not drunk," O'Hara said virtuously. "And I just called to find out if you want me to come back to work."

"Did you have to go two hundred miles out of town to put in the call?" Braddock yelled.

O'Hara chuckled. "Stick your head out the window, Brad, and we can save long-distance tolls. Anyway, I'll come back to the *Trib* if you beg me to."

"Beg you! After the way you walked out on me to become a lousy stinking press agent, I should beg you!"

"I'd hate to have to take a good story like this to the opposition."

"Huh?" said Braddock. The loudness went out of his voice. "So you've got a story up your sleeve, huh?"

"Just an exclusive angle on that Diplomat killing."

"Why the hell didn't you say so, Ken? Shoot!"

"Am I working for the *Trib*?"

Braddock said: "Irish, I'd beat your ears off if you tried to work for any other sheet in town. I wasn't sore at you so much as I was sort of hurt you wouldn't listen to me and walked out on the Trib to be a—a—"

"A lousy stinking flack?" said O'Hara.

"Well, press agents are all right in their place but you weren't cut out for one. I tried to tell you that but no, you wouldn't listen. You had to—well, what the hell, welcome back, Irish."

"It's swell to be back, Brad."

Braddock said briskly: "And now let's skip the corn and get to the story. Shoot."

"Yesterday," said O'Hara, "I blundered into Room 907 at the Diplomat, looking for the hotel photog, a little guy named Clancy. Instead of Clancy, I walked in on four guys that looked hotter than a backfire. One of them was the jockey-sized guy who was found stabbed to death half an hour later in a linen closet on the ninth floor."

"Mmm," said Braddock in the monotone that indicated he was taking notes. "You got any identification on them?"

"No. By the way, have the cops identified the little guy?"

"Not yet. Let's have a description of the other three."

"I can give you better than a word picture. The missing Clancy arrived just about as these guys were about to have words with me about crashing the room. Clancy had the notion it was a convention group so he snapped a shot at them. While they were still looking startled, I got Clancy—and me—the hell out of there. Twenty minutes later one of the guys cornered Clancy in the washroom and kicked most of his plates to pieces. But it so happened he didn't get the shot Clancy had made in 907. Send a copy boy over to Mike's Grill and have him pick up an envelope I left there with Mike. There's some notes in it and a print of the shot, showing all the guys that were in the room, including the prospective corpse."

"Oke," said Braddock. O'Hara could hear him yelling for a copy boy, telling the boy what to do and, for Pete's sake, to get the lead out of his pants. "O.K., Ken, that's swell. The story is sort of half-baked—we need identification, background, motive—but maybe your old pal, Lenroot, can get action on that once he has the picture. He's going to be pretty sore you didn't give him this

photo yesterday—hey, what the hell am I saying? I'm sore, myself. Why didn't you give me the picture yesterday? And what the hell's the idea of you running off two hundred miles to call in about it?"

"To Query One," said O'Hara, "I tried to give both you and Lenroot the dope and you both brushed me off and I said to myself, nuts to both those guys and I hope they hate nuts. To Query Two, there's more to the story."

"Well, what're we wasting time on conversation for? Give."

"You've heard of a guy named Rex Miller?"

"We had a story on him this morning. So what?"

"Yesterday afternoon I saw him ride off from the Diplomat with the three survivors from 907. For reasons I won't go into now, I figured they were headed for somewhere around here. And tonight I tracked Miller down, found him being very social with one of the guys from 907 at a little mining camp about twenty miles out of Alkali Center. I have a hunch if you'll Wirephoto that picture back to Midland City you'll find out that the guys in 907 are the racket boys he's supposedly prosecuting."

"You mean you think he's sold out to the other side?"

"Well, in almost the words of that Hoosier poet—the hoodlums'll get you if you don't watch out."

"You're sure on all this, Irish?"

"I got a picture of Miller and the hood playing cards and drinking together. I'm sending that plate in by a grease monkey from the local garage. He owns a hot rod and is yearning to let it out. The plate should be there by two-thirty, time for the second home edition. Oke?"

"Oke," said Braddock. "What makes with you now?"

"Clancy and a couple deputy sheriffs and I are waltzing out to visit the mine. The deputies say it was sold to Easterners a while back but hasn't been worked since the sale. Chances are we won't find anyone hanging around out there now."

O'Hara was right. When he, Clancy and the deputies got out to the flat-roofed shack, it was dark, deserted. The Cad was gone and O'Hara got some pleasure out of thinking how hard somebody had had to work to pump up those big tires by hand. The station wagon squatted by the mine shaft but the deputies learned little from looking it over except that it had been bought the day before in Riverside by, so the bill of sale said, one W. J. Herman. The fat man, O'Hara thought, had probably acquired it because running around the desert country in the pale-green Cad with the Illinois plates would draw too much attention.

O'HARA and Clancy pulled into the *Tribune* parking lot at eleven the next morning. O'Hara had had no sleep. His feet were sore from the long hike across the desert. His stomach was unhappy about the hamburgers he had forced on it in lieu of breakfast. A blanket of the famous Los Angeles smog overlay the downtown district and the acrid fumes bit his lungs and smarted his eyes.

But he felt fine. The thought that once more he had a desk in the city room on the third floor of the dingy gray *Tribune* Building was enough to make him feel dandy.

He went inside with Clancy at his heels. He stepped into the old and creaking elevator and slapped the bald, elderly operator on the shoulder. He said: "Hi, Otto. Beautiful day."

Otto said: "Yes, Mr. O'Hara." He didn't glance directly at O'Hara. His face had a sort of embarrassed look, the look a man has for a friend who has done something unpardonable.

But O'Hara was too keyed up to notice it.

Otto rocked the car to a stop at the third floor and O'Hara took Clancy's pipestem arm. "Come on, little man, and I'll show you the place that's going to be your home from now on."

"You think they'll give me a job, Kenny?"

"If I ask 'em to," said O'Hara, "they'll give you a couple of the presses. After

last night, I figure I rate around here again." He flipped a greeting at the blond receptionist. "Morning, Duchess."

The receptionist said in a very restrained way: "Good morning, Mr. O'Hara," and went back to sorting mail.

O'Hara thought she could have been more enthusiastic in welcoming back the prodigal but he guessed she was busy. He and Clancy went through the gate and past the partition into the city room, which was quiet, almost deserted, at this hour of the morning. A man on the rewrite battery was hammering out a story and Braddock sat at the city desk.

That wasn't normal; Braddock should have been off and the chair should have been occupied by George Hale, day city editor. A faint sense of unease began to steal over O'Hara when he put Braddock's presence together with the chill greetings he'd had from Otto and the receptionist.

He said: "Hi, Brad."

Braddock said: "Morning, Ken." His voice was level, noncommittal.

O'Hara frowned down at Braddock for a moment. Then he said: "What goes on here? The welcome I get from Otto and the Duchess and you, a guy would think I had bad breath or something."

Braddock was a small, bulldog-jawed man with keen blue eyes and, on occasion, a fiery temper. He didn't vent the temper now. He said mildly: "Bad news certainly gets around an office."

"What's that crack mean?"

Braddock said: "Maury, let's have what you've done on that story?"

The rewrite man pulled the sheet from his typewriter and flipped it to Braddock, who relayed it to O'Hara. The story led off:

> Three Midwest racketeers were hunted throughout the Southwest today on kidnap charges, following the daring escape from their hands of Rex Miller, Midland City gang buster.



Kidnaped from the Hotel Diplomat here in broad daylight and held in a desert shack for twenty-four hours, Miller won freedom early today by a desperate leap from the gangsters' car as it sped along a road near Bakersfield. Although bound hand and foot, the vice prosecutor had managed to operate a door handle with one knee and threw himself out as the car rounded a curve. Still bound, he was found a few minutes later by a passing motorist, who rushed him to Bakersfield for treatment of painful but not serious injuries. Afterward he returned to Los Angeles to aid local authorities in the hunt for the asserted kidnapers.

The hunted men have been identified as Fred "Tiny" Waldon, Ernie "The Angel" Angelo and Arthur Vickers, all of Midland City, where Miller has been heading an investigation into vice conditions highlighted by the recent bomb-murder of a prominent minister.

The dramatic denouement of the kidnaping was completely at variance with an earlier story which this paper published through a regrettable misconception of the circumstances involved and which intimated that Miller possibly was cooperating with the racketeer trio.

O'HARA slammed the copy paper down on Braddock's desk. His face had flushed a dark red, his jaw was tight. He said: "Brad, he's lying from hell to breakfast. Miller went away with those guys all on his little own. And if that wasn't gin rummy and drinks between pals at the shack last night, I'm blind. The picture will prove that. Where's the shot I sent in?"

Braddock said flatly: "No picture, Irish. The plate you sent in was light-fogged—but bad."

Clancy said: "Jeez, Kenny, I guess you didn't know how to work my box."

O'Hara was nearly speechless. "No picture?" He turned on Clancy. "Don't tell me I don't know how to work a box."

"Well, mine's kinda wacky," said Clancy. "On account of I work left-handed, I got the exposure set up just backward."

O'Hara shook his head as though he was trying to roll off a succession of punches. Then he said: "Brad, don't let this Miller phony put it over on you. I know what I saw—he got in that car willingly—"

"Perhaps you know what you see, O'Hara," said a crisp voice behind him. "But you don't know how to interpret it."

O'Hara swung around. Rex Miller and John Norman, publisher of the *Tribune,* had stepped out of Norman's office. Miller's left wrist was taped, one side of his face bore marks of brush burns. His eyes were red-rimmed with loss of sleep but they bored into O'Hara.

He said: "When I ran into Ernie Angelo at the hotel doorway, he told me he had a gun in his pocket and that he'd kill me on the spot if I didn't get into that car."

"Ernie wasn't holding a gun on you last night to make you play cards and drink with him," O'Hara snapped.

Miller snapped back: "You didn't notice, I suppose, that my ankles were taped to the chair. There was nothing I could do at the moment but accept the situation and pass the time as well as I could."

John Norman, gray, neat-haired, said: "Now, Mr. Miller, I trust that in view of our complete retraction, you'll reconsider—"

"Sorry," Miller said curtly. "I understand, of course, that O'Hara is primarily to blame for the whole disgraceful story—but the *Tribune* printed it and my only recourse is to sue. A retraction isn't enough to undo the damage done to my reputation."

"But, man," said Norman. "A half-million dollars!"

Miller went away, hard-heeled, toward the city room door and Norman followed him and O'Hara scowled down at Braddock. He said: "Brad, you're not going to fight, not going to back me up?"

"Ken," said Braddock, "if we had a prayer, I'd back you to the limit. But everything points to the fact that you went off half-cocked on the story." He shook his hard, round head regretfully. "Just one week as a press agent ruined you, got you to dreaming up yarns."

O'Hara said: "Clancy, let's get out of here. This appeasement atmosphere is beginning to gag me."

Out on First Street, Clancy murmured: "I need a drink."

"Do you think I don't?" said O'Hara.

They started down the street toward Mike's Grill and when they had gone half a block a rough hand grabbed O'Hara's arm from behind and swung him around.

It was Lenroot's hand and he bared his yellow teeth at O'Hara. He said: "So, you lousy hold-out—"

"Take that paw off me," O'Hara said, his voice coming huskily from behind his teeth.

"If you'd given me that picture, I'd had those guys. I got a good mind to—"

O'Hara said in the back-of-the-teeth voice: "You haven't got a good mind, Lenroot. And if you don't take that mitt off my arm, so help me, I'll slug you—if I go to the clink for it!"

Their eyes locked and presently Lenroot's hand fell away. He said: "You should have given me that picture, O'Hara, and you know it."

"Did I try to? And did you kick me downstairs for my try?"

O'Hara turned his back on Lenroot and, with Clancy leading the way eagerly, went into Mike's Grill.

TONY AMES found O'Hara and Clancy in the third booth on the right at Mike's when she came in at one o'clock.

Clancy was working on his sixth highball and he wasn't sober. He said vaguely: "Sit down, babe. Have a drinkie?"

O'Hara didn't greet Tony. He scowled down at the Scotch that represented his third encore. He wasn't plastered but the alcohol, added to fatigue and frustration, had him fairly high.

Tony Ames sat down opposite him. "Ken, I just got to the office and heard about it." Her clear hazel eyes were troubled.

O'Hara muttered: "Rub it in, kitten. If I'd taken you along like you wanted, you could have backed me up on the story."

Tony let that slide. She said: "Is there anything I can do, anything you want me to do?"

"You could go back and tell Brad he's got guts that're tough like a dish of boiled tripe."

"Brad's in a spot. Norman hopes to smooth Miller over, escape a libel suit, get away with just a retraction. He won't let Brad fight it. And anyway, Ken—" She hesitated.

O'Hara fixed her with a narrow, wounded stare. "You, too! You think I'm a dummy who'd—"

Tony said quickly: "Don't say that, Ken. You know I think you're tops as a reporter and as a guy. It's just that I instinctively liked Miller, that's it hard to see him as the kind who'd go crooked. Call it woman's intuition and even a woman's intuition could be wrong. All of which is aside from the real problem, which is to get you out of this jam by proving you're right and Miller's a crook. What can I do to help?"

O'Hara lit a cigarette, peered a little owlishly at Tony through the smoke cloud. "O.K., kitten. I've been wondering how Miller could fall out of a car that would be moving at least thirty-forty miles an hour and come up practically intact. Want to call that Bakersfield hospital for me and get an exact list of Miller's injuries?"

"The office has that report. Brush burns on the left knee, left shoulder and face, a sprained left wrist."

"Another thing I've been wondering. Why didn't those guys just stop their car, back up and grab him again?"

"According to the story he told," Tony said, "the motorist who found him was only a short distance behind. It scared them off."

Clancy said brightly: "Did I ever tell you about when I was working for the Wichita *Eagle* and I was throwed out of a car in a traffic crash and came up standing, just in time to get a shot of both drivers sailing through the air? Did I ever tell you?"

"No," said O'Hara.

"You wanta hear?"

"No."

"O.K. Let's have a drink."

"Yes."

Tony said: "Ken, I've got to get back

to the office. Promise you'll go home and get some sleep and then we'll figure what to do."

"Sure," said O'Hara.

"Sure what?"

"Sure I'll figure what to do."

Tony shook her head hopelessly, patted O'Hara's hand, went out without looking back.

The waiter came and took their order for more drinks. An hour later O'Hara squinted at Clancy. O'Hara wasn't seeing double; there was only about one-and-a-half of the little man.

O'Hara said: "Let's go out and ring doorbells, Clancy, specifically Mr. Miller's doorbell."

"Do we go out there and whap him, pappy? Or what?"

"Suppose," said O'Hara, "I was to suddenly find out that I'd sent the wrong plate in from Alkali City, Clancy? Suppose I was to call on Mr. Miller and tell him about my mistake and say that the picture shows him to be in such a position in his chair that his ankles couldn't have been taped to the legs? Suppose I told him I was sore at the way the *Tribune* had kicked me around and that if I could get together with his pals, I'd consider selling the picture?"

"What picture?" said Clancy.

"Oh, nuts—let's go."

They took a cab, partly because O'Hara didn't like to drive when he had that much Scotch aboard and partly because he couldn't recall at the moment where he had left the coupe.

Two blocks from the Diplomat, O'Hara stopped the cab and paid it off. He took Clancy into a diner and had three cups of black coffee for himself. Clancy disapproved. He said drinking coffee was a bad habit; he'd known a guy on the Washington *Post* who gave up liquor and started drinking coffee and was dead in three months.

"He walked in front of a sightseeing bus," Clancy explained.

"What did that have to do with coffee?"

"If he hadn't given up liquor," said Clancy, "he would of, at that hour of the evening, been at the Press Club bar, licking up highballs safely out of the way of traffic.

THEY walked to the Diplomat and O'Hara parked Clancy in the lobby. The coffee had brought O'Hara pretty well back to the point where he was walking on the ground; seen from that vantage point, his idea of running a bluff on Miller about a non-existent picture seemed a little thin. But it might get a reaction and he couldn't think at the moment of a better idea. He took an elevator to seven and rapped on the door of 763. He rapped again.

There was movement inside and then the door came open a cautious four inches. Rex Miller's bony, earnest face peered at him.

The face drew down into a frown. "Well, O'Hara, what do you want, coming here?"

"Talk to you."

"We've got nothing to talk about."

"You could be wrong, couldn't you?"

The look in Miller's eyes said he didn't think he could be wrong. In the room the telephone began to shrill. The sound pulled Miller back a little from the door involuntarily and O'Hara used the moment to shove the door wider and walk in. When it was done, Miller lifted his shoulders resignedly and crossed the room to the phone.

He uncradled the instrument, said: "Yes?"

O'Hara watched him. He thought the pale bony face went a shade more pallid.

Miller said: "No. . .No I tell you. . . Damn it, I'm busy. I'll call you back." He slammed the phone down, faced around. "Well?"

O'Hara had swiftly discarded his idea of talking about a fictitious picture. He said: "Look, Miller, I was a dope. I'm sorry. I apologize. Isn't the apology and the retraction enough without a libel suit?"

Miller sneered. "Crawling now, are you? No, O'Hara, I'll get a judgment that'll take the gold fillings out of every tooth on the *Tribune*."

For five minutes O'Hara crawled. It did no good. He finally slapped his hat on, and said: "O.K., if that's the way you feel."

"That's how I feel and it'll cost the *Tribune* half a million."

O'Hara went out, closed the door in a quiet, dejected way and then took long, fast strides to the elevator bank. The elevators didn't give him a break; it was two minutes before a down-car stopped and another three minutes before he hit the lobby. He angled across fast to the switchboard room and leaned on the railing there beside Mrs. Van Druten, the gray-haired and dignified head operator of the Diplomat.

He said: "Van, if there's a call comes through from 763—"

Mrs. Van Druten said: "The call is through, O'Hara. And you smell like a distillery. Why don't you ever buy me a drink?"

"I'll buy you a million. What number did 763 call?"

"I can't give out that information. Anyway, I couldn't stand a million drinks, O'Hara, and you couldn't buy that many. And I can't give you that number."

Mrs. Van Druten lifted a stack of telephone tabs, began to sort them. One slipped from her fingers and drifted out over the railing to the floor. She said: "O'Hara, be a gentleman and pick up that tab for me."

O'Hara picked it up and engraved a phone number on his memory. He handed the tab back and said: "I'll make that two million drinks."

He went back to the lobby and stepped into a phone booth, got on the line with a telephone company special agent whom he knew.

When he finally hung up, he had the information that the telephone number Miller had called was listed to a residence, that of one D. Birkall, at an address on West Seventh.

O'Hara jotted the number down and went out to look for Clancy. Clancy had done his disappearing act again and O'Hara shrugged. He didn't feel like nursing Clancy now, anyway.

CHAPTER FIVE

Knives and Knaves

THE address turned out to be a three-story brick structure between loft buildings. A store window at the ground floor had a "For Rent" sign in it. At one side of the show window was a plate glass door that apparently gave access to a stairway leading to apartments on the second and third floors. The windows were dark.

Dusk was settling down as O'Hara dismissed his cab at the nearest corner. He strolled in the gray light toward the three-story building. He gave the plate glass door a quick try as he passed and found that it was locked.

Rounding the corner of the next side street, he drifted down to the alley that paralleled Seventh Street and walked down the alley to the rear of the three-story building. He saw no rear stairs, no fire escape. But there was a panel truck parked in the areaway behind the vacant store and above the car the white fringe of a curtain fluttered in the draft from an open window.

When dusk had turned into darkness, O'Hara clambered to the top of the truck. The windowsill was still three inches too high. He jumped, caught the sill and hauled himself upward. A moment later he was inside a darkened room that had the odor of a kitchen. He found a swinging door, passed through it and struck a match. The match flare showed living room furniture, and, on a table by the wall, the shape of a phone. He crossed to it in the dying light of the match, struck another and saw that the number on the phone was the one that Rex Miller had called.

He decided it wouldn't be smart to turn on lights. So he used a book of matches, prowling the living room and the single bedroom that lay off it. In the bedroom he found a man's shirt on a rumpled bed, two suits hanging in the closet. The suits bore the label of a Midland City tailor. The name of the customer, inked on the label, was that of Arthur Vickers.

Back in the darkened living room, his

hand on the phone, he debated whether to call Braddock first or Lenroot. Because this was it; it could be proved that Miller had called this number and a police stake-out would pick up Vickers here and Mr. Miller's libel action and his fairy story about being kidnaped would be blown out of the water. O'Hara wished he didn't have to depend on either Braddock or Lenroot; but he'd gone as far as he could alone.

While he was still undecided which call to make first, there was the distant click of the vestibule door. There were feet on the stairs. O'Hara swore briefly and bitterly and retreated to the bedroom. He heard the apartment door open and then lights sprang on in the living room. He flattened himself in a corner behind the door. He could see a segment of the living room through the tiny crack between the door and its frame.

The fat man—Tiny Waldon—passed down the room, shedding his coat, hitching pants higher on his paunch. He went out of sight, saying: "Boys, we got to do some fast figuring." His voice was mellow, rolled smoothly up from his belly.

The wiry young man who was Arthur Vickers stopped by a cabinet radio to work a cigarette lighter that stood there. Through a cloud of smoke he said: "You're not kidding, Tony. I've been in jams before but none as form-fitting as this one." He exhaled a cloud of smoke and went out of O'Hara's view.

Ernie's voice was a snarl from somewhere in the room. "If Miller had used his head, we wouldn't been jammed. Why the hell, Rex, did you pull a dumb caper like identifying us on the kidnaping? I oughta beat your brains out for that."

There was a little silence and O'Hara waited for Miller's voice. It didn't come at once. Miller walked into the portion of the room that O'Hara could see. His face was tight and pale and there was anger in it. He picked the chair by the radio.

He said: "We agreed on the kidnap story and on the escape, didn't we? And the *Tribune* had that picture made in 907 and had it identified by Midland City. So what could I do but back up the identification?"

"You coulda claimed you were blindfolded," Ernie said.

"I had to tell my story before I knew O'Hara's picture at the mine was a dud." Miller cleared his throat harshly. "My opinion is that, for a supposedly smart mob, you fellows have acted like morons. If you hadn't killed the little fellow in the hotel room, there wouldn't have been any stink."

Tiny's voice rolled out placatingly. "Perhaps you don't understand exactly what happened there, Rex. The little guy picked up Ernie the first night we got in. They got drunk together. He said he was a gun from Chi, he knew the names of a lot of Chicago loogans and things about them you'd ordinarily have to be a gun to know. And he seemed to know angles here. Well, maybe we were too gullible—but we could use a guy that knew local angles. And, first thing we knew, this little guy had learned plenty about us. But he made a mistake that afternoon in 907—he took off his coat and went into the bathroom to wash. Vick prowled the coat just for the hell of it and found stuff that showed the guy was a Chicago private dick named Hanley. Well, we put the screws to him and he admitted he was working for the Citizens' Committee. Seems they didn't quite trust you so they had him working on us under cover and he tailed us to the Coast. We couldn't let him walk out of that room so I let Ernie operate. We just had to do the best we could under the circumstances."

Watching Miller's face, O'Hara thought it turned a little sick. But he didn't feel sorry for the guy; he couldn't feel sorry for heels who sold out.

Miller said: "It was still a mistake to have killed him there. And that expedition to the desert was a piece of unnecessary stupidity!"

"Well, Vick wanted a look at that mine he'd bought and got suckered on and we all thought it'd be a good idea to get out of L.A. for a few days. As for dragging you along, we had to keep an eye on you until our deal was complete."

"To hell with the arguing," said Ernie's voice. "We're jammed. What do we do now?"

Waldon's tone was still smooth. "We can salvage a lot out of it. Let's take it point by point. First, I've just had word that Rex's man back in Midland City has handed over the affidavits on the killing there to our man. That breaks the back of that case. This California killing is tougher because of that photograph in 907. But if we get out of the state and back home, they'll need more proof than the picture to get us extradited with the connections we have. As for the kidnaping, Rex will refuse to sign a complaint."

Miller said: "You know what that does to me. I'm washed up back home but good, now."

"My boy," said Waldon, "you're getting enough dough out of it so you don't have to worry about being washed up."

Miller's jaw worked and his voice went up, cracked a bit. "But I've got to know about—"

"Everything will be O.K. there. But first you get out of the state so we'll know we're clear on the snatch rap. Right, Vick?"

"I guess so," said Vickers' voice.

Ernie's voice said: "What the hell's wrong with you, Vick? Ain't you interested in all this?"

"Sure, sure. I was just relaxing and I think I need a drink to help. Be with you guys in a minute."

O'Hara heard footsteps crossing the living room. Vickers walked through his line of vision, started through the doorway, was lost to view. O'Hara flattened himself against the wall; with the door in its present position, he figured he had better than an even chance that Vickers wouldn't see him.

Lights went on in the bedroom. The door whipped away from the wall and the wiry man was looking at him, smiling a little and holding a gun in line with O'Hara's belt buckle.

"Hello, O'Hara," he said. "What the hell are you doing here—still looking for Clancy? Come on out and join the party."

O'HARA made an upward gesture with his hands, his shoulders, and marched out past Vickers to the living room. Ernie's dark face was still gaping at this development but Tiny Waldon was chuckling, his belly rippling with every chuckle.

In his mellow voice he said: "Wonderful, Vick. Wonderful! How did you do it—with mirrors?"

The wiry man expanded a little. "I never use matches, I use a cigarette lighter. I saw burned matches in a couple of ashtrays so I figured somebody had been prowling in here since dark—and maybe they were still here. I checked the kitchen while you guys talked. Nothing. That left the bedroom. And after a bit I caught a twinkle of light a couple of times at the crack of the door. It must have been one of O'Hara's buttons."

"And now," Ernie chortled, "we can use O'Hara to play button, button, let him have it on the button."

O'Hara still said nothing. Little beads of perspiration began to pop out on his forehead and there was a vacant, cold feeling at the pit of his stomach. He looked at Rex Miller but Miller's eyes were downcast, his face stony.

The fat man rubbed cushioned palms together. His smile was delighted, the green-rock eyes twinkling. He said: "Well, well, O'Hara, I suppose you heard everything from behind that door."

"I couldn't miss," O'Hara said. His throat had gone dry and constricted and his voice was a little hoarse. Never one to kid himself, he knew he was in a bad spot; the fat man and Ernie and Vickers, he was sure, wouldn't want to have him leave that room alive.

"Of course you couldn't miss," said Waldon. "And you know what it means."

O'Hara nodded. "For my dough, fatty, it means I'm in a nest of rats whose first instinct is to lie and chisel and who'd just as soon commit murder as take a drink."

"Self-preservation, my boy," Waldon said unctuously, "is the first law of nature."

Ernie had quietly and very smoothly

drawn a long thin-bladed knife from somewhere under his coat. He felt the point delicately with his left thumb. His dusty-black eyes had expression in them now—eagerness. He said: "Why waste time talking, Tiny?"

Vickers said: "Don't get blood around, Ernie. After all, I just borrowed this place from my brother-in-law and he won't like blood around when he gets back from Vegas."

"Did I get any blood around the hotel room?" Ernie said, sounding a little wounded. "Now, Tiny?"

"It might as well be now."

Ernie got up easily and sinuously.

O'Hara said in a low, taut voice: "Miller, I can understand these guys. They're rats, they know they're rats and they don't pretend to be anything else. But a guy like you, a guy that sells out his own side—the decent people—well, hell, compared to you the rat is the king of beasts. You must have started out as a right guy, Miller. There must have been a time in your life when you could look in a mirror and not hate what you saw. So are you going to sit there now and do nothing?"

Miller had a death's-head look. His eyes were sunken, his cheeks suddenly gaunt. He strained out: "O'Hara, there's nothing I can do. I'm not armed. I couldn't help if I wanted to. There's nothing I can do."

"Oh, yes, there is," said O'Hara. "You can dream about this on the long winter evenings."

Ernie came across the room in a half-crouch, the shiny blade of the knife making an exclamation point in front of him. O'Hara cursed and took a step to meet him.

Vickers chopped his gun barrel down on O'Hara's skull.

O'Hara fell and spun as he fell, trying to watch Ernie. He saw Ernie above him, saw the knife poised for a down-thrust.

Miller screamed: "Wait!" Again. "Wait, I tell you!"

The knife didn't descend. O'Hara whipped around, got to one knee and saw Miller on his feet, bending over the fat man from behind, whispering into the fat man's ear.

The fat man shook his head. "No, Rex. O'Hara knows too much, entirely too much. Take him, Ernie!"

Miller straightened. His right hand came away from behind Waldon, holding a gun, a short-barreled, shiny .32. He said thickly: "On your feet, O'Hara, and get out of here!"

For a moment the silence in the room had a stunned quality.

Then Waldon said persuasively: "Rex, don't be a dummy. Knowing what he does, O'Hara can't walk out of here. He'd dynamite all of us, you included. Now give me back that gun and, if you don't like watching it, go for a stroll."

Miller breathed heavily, audibly. He didn't seem too familiar with the handling of a gun. But he said: "Drop your gun, Vickers."

"You damned fool," snapped the wiry man. "You're forgetting that we hold an ace."

"You've all carried me along as far as I can go," said Miller drearily. "There'll be no killing here—unless it's one of you that gets it. I—tell—you—drop that gun!"

Ernie, with an incredibly swift wrist motion, flicked the knife at Miller. His execution was perfect, his aim lousy. The slim blade missed Miller a foot but it made him jerk to one side, his hand convulsing on the gun.

The gun went off loudly and the fat man fell out of his chair, blood spurting from a temple that had magically disintegrated. Legs moved beside O'Hara and he tackled the legs, brought Vickers crashing down on him. Vickers' gun exploded as he fell but O'Hara was untouched. He brought a vicious knee up into Vicker's groin, saw an Adam's apple bobbing in front of him and socked it. Vickers screamed brokenly but he continued to squirm, fight, kick and try to bring the gun inward at O'Hara. O'Hara made a grab for the gun, missed and grabbed again. This time he got his hand on it. The two men strained desperately, silently.

O'Hara was vaguely aware that some-

where outside of the apartment there was the sound of running feet. He was aware in the same foggy way that a gun —not Vickers'—had spoken uproariously a couple of times. He concentrated on the wiry man's wrist, forced it down and down, gave it a final bitter wrench. The gun banged and Vickers cried out, went rigid, relaxed into limpness. O'Hara took the gun from the boneless hand and shoved himself to his feet. The dark-faced man was on hands and knees in the middle of the room, his head hanging and wagging as though it belonged to some freak toy. Miller leaned against the wall and blood streamed from a long tear across one cheek. He dangled the .32 in one hand and watched Ernie inch his way slowly and painfully toward a gun that lay no more than a foot from his right hand. He didn't make it. His arms and his legs collapsed and his face plowed into the rug and he lay still.

MILLER shuddered and his eyes, a little dazed, came up to meet O'Hara's stare. Then he shoved himself away from the wall and came toward O'Hara, the nickeled gun seeming to feel a way for him.

O'Hara said: "Guns down, Miller. Thanks for everything—but you're still not in the clear."

Miller's eyes burned at O'Hara now. He muttered: "One side, O'Hara—get out of the way! I've got to talk to him before he dies."

He barged past, went to his knees beside the wiry man. The wiry man flickered dull eyes at him.

"That was—really a—merry-go-round, Rex," he gasped. He hiccuped and blood spurted past his lips, dyed his chin and his collar.

Miller said hoarsely: "Vickers, where is she? Man, you're washed up—you've got to tell me before you die."

The wiry man's voice came from a great distance. "Yep, Rex—washed up. That's me."

"For God's sake, where is she?"

"Upstairs. We had her upstairs—doped—a dame looking after—her." The wiry man made an attempt to grin. "Sounded like—the dame—took a powder when—shooting started. Like—I'm taking—powder now—"

He choked on blood. The half-grin went away like a flame blown out and life went out of him at the same instant.

Miller was already off his knees, turning toward the door. O'Hara followed him, forehead corrugated and speculative. Miller jerked the hall door wide, turned and took stairs to the third floor several at a time. A door stood ajar at the head of the stairs and he thrust past it.

When O'Hara reached the door, he saw a lighted living room that matched the one below. Lights went on beyond the bedroom doorway and O'Hara crossed, not hurrying, and halted on the threshold.

Miller was bending over a girl on the bed, lifting one of the girl's limp hands, feeling for a pulse. The girl was young, dark-haired, thin under the blanket that was tucked below a lax chin. She slept heavily, not moving. O'Hara could see more than a casual resemblance between her thin youthful face and the bony, anxious countenance of the man bending over her.

O'Hara said: "Sister?"

Miller nodded. "Thank God I've found her, O'Hara."

"They put the snatch on her to handle you, huh?"

Miller took a deep breath of relief and stood up. He said: "Six days ago I got a message in Midland City that Linda had been kidnaped and that I was to come out here, register at the Diplomat and see Waldon, meanwhile keeping my mouth shut. I had no choice. I flew out here and Waldon put his proposal. He said the two key witnesses in the Midland City case had disappeared. I checked by phone. It was true. But I had affidavits from both of them. Waldon told me that if I'd arrange to have the affidavits turned over to his man back there, I'd get ten thousand dollars and Linda would be freed. Otherwise she'd be killed. I pretended to play along. I arranged for the affidavits to be turned over—but not until they had

been photostated. I was to get the money tonight and be told where Linda was being held."

O'Hara said: "And you took a chance on upsetting everything by keeping Ernie's knife out of me."

"I couldn't stand there and see murder done."

"Thanks," said O'Hara. "And that, Miller, is not an empty word. Well, we'd better get an ambulance." He started to turn, then said: "About the libel suit now—"

"Forget it. That was just part of the act I had to put on until they'd released Linda."

O'Hara went back downstairs and got on the phone. He called the receiving hospital and reported merely that an ambulance was needed for a sick woman; he didn't want any opposition reporters barging around for a while at least. After that he called the *Tribune*, got through to the city desk.

He said soberly: "Ken O'Hara, Brad."

"Where," said Braddock, "the hell have you been? We've got a regular Irish wake going on here for you."

"Huh?"

"Your friend, Clancy, came in and said you'd got a line on the kidnapers and you'd disappeared. Your pal, Tony Ames, has been chewing her fingernails to the elbows. Even your sidekick, Lenroot, is hanging around trying to find out what mess you've been cooking up for the cops. So what have you been doing?"

"Settling that libel suit for you."

"How come?"

"I've got the real story now, Brad, and it's a lulu."

"Shoot—we've got five minutes to the next deadline. I'll make my apologies to you later, Irish."

O'Hara talked at breackneck speed for a minute and a half. Then he said: "That'll hold you for now. Put Lenroot on."

Lenroot came on and said: "Hello."

"Hello, monkey."

"All right, you made a monkey out of me." Lenroot's voice sounded unaccustomedly old, heavy. "And I guess the story you'll write won't make any less of a monkey out of me."

"How does it feel?"

"It don't feel good, Irish."

"I didn't like it, either, when you made an ape out of me the other day. Be seeing you, pal—out in the sticks."

"O.K.—and I hope I catch you spittin' on the sidewalk on my beat." But his voice didn't have the old bounce.

There was the sound of several voices faintly at the other end and then Clancy's voice came clearly. "Hey, Kenny, I was looking for you all over. All over I was hunting."

"That," said O'Hara, "makes us even. I've been hunting you every five minutes for the last three days. Put my girl friend on."

Presently Tony Ames' voice came over the wire and O'Hara said: "Well, you were right, angel face—as always. Miller was leveling all the time."

"I knew it, Ken. I was sure of it. When I get an intuition—"

"Sure, kitten. That intuition stuff is where you gals have it on us guys. We have to get our facts the hard way. Had dinner yet?"

"Not yet."

"You've got a date." He was silent for a moment.

"Yes, Ken?"

"Put Lenroot back on, kitten."

Lenroot's voice said presently: "Ain't you rubbed it in enough?"

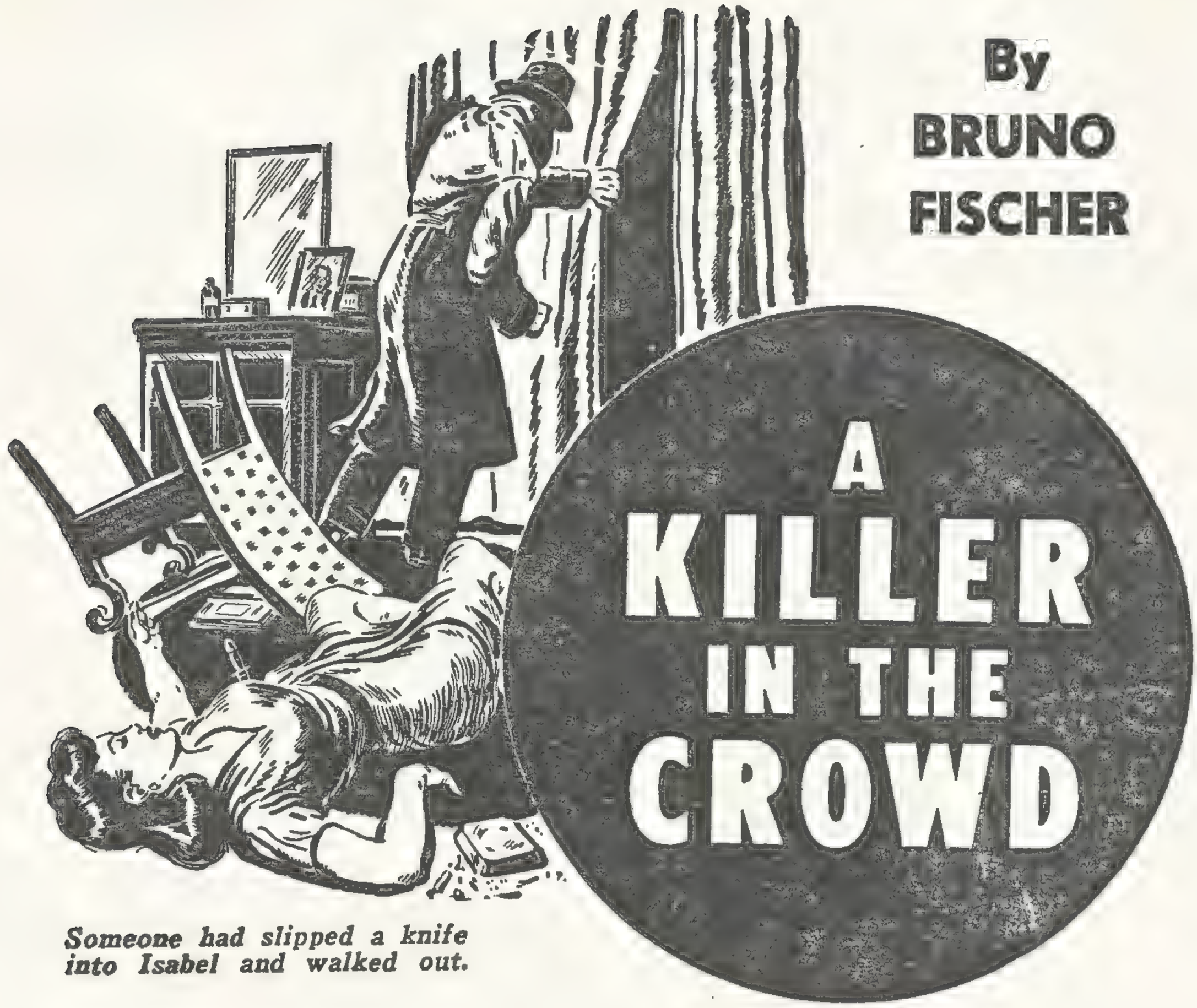
"Get the lead out of your pants and get out here," O'Hara growled. "How can I give you credit on the case if you're not around?"

"Huh?" said Lenroot. Then he rumbled: "Hell with you— I don't need any charity."

"Nuts to charity," O'Hara said. "How're you and I going to dig up any good fights if you get sent to the sticks?"

"Yeah," said Lenroot. "That's right, ain't it?" His voice began to have a lift to it again. "You got something there, Irish. I'm coming out—and, by cripes, I think when I get there I'll hang one on your chin just for luck."

"You," O'Hara said, "and who else?"



By BRUNO FISCHER

A KILLER IN THE CROWD

Someone had slipped a knife into Isabel and walked out.

His alibi was perfect—or it should have been. Thousands saw him at the moment of the crime, but not one remembered his face. They were minding their own business—as he was minding his. And he swore it wasn't killing.

SO MANY out-of-towners are always saying that our city isn't friendly, that we New Yorkers don't even bother arguing with them any more, if we can avoid it.

There's no way to make them understand that you can live in a house for ten years and not even know the names of all the people on your floor, let alone everything that happened to them since the day they were born.

The thing is that New Yorkers are too busy minding their own business, of which they have more than anybody else. Besides, New York is too big. There's nowhere a man can be lonelier than in a crowd—and more unnoticed.

I'm a homicide lieutenant on the finest police force in the world. That's why I was there on the inside that time New York came pretty close to killing a man by minding its own business.

John Garson was a young man who had a terrific crush on a fiery brunette named Isabel Lewis. One evening at eight o'clock he called on her in her two-room apartment in a run-down apartment house in the West Nineties.

A minute after he entered, her closest

neighbors in the building got an earful of them arguing. The battle was as loud and shrill as if they'd been husband and wife, and practically every word came through those paper-thin walls. The usual thing. Garson had learned that Isabel was seeing a lot of a lad named Clarence Hannen, and he didn't like it one bit.

It took Garson ten minutes to say all he had to say. Then he walked out on her.

Night was falling and it was starting to rain when he reached the street. His car was parked a couple of hundred feet away. He drove east to Central Park West, then turned south. He was very upset and didn't remember much of the drive except that at Columbus Circle he went through a red light and came close to knocking over a man who jumped out of the way just in time. At Fifty-Seventh Street Garson headed east again. He lived in Queens and was taking the widest street to the bridge.

As he was crossing Seventh Avenue, his motor stalled. The car rolled a short distance more and came to a dead stop directly in front of Carnegie Hall.

By that time it was close to eight-thirty. There was a concert in Carnegie Hall, and a mob trying to get in was jammed under the marquee, out of the rain and the street was packed solid with cabs and private cars trying to get to the curb to discharge their passengers. And there was Garson's car stuck in the middle of it, with traffic piling up behind him past the Seventh Avenue intersection. Garson almost wore out his battery, but the motor stubbornly refused to catch.

WELL, the point of what happened from here on, is that nothing happened. Horns honked and drivers yelled to him to get out of the way, and people waiting to get into Carnegie Hall stood watching. Nobody came over to him. Garson just sat there helplessly pressing the starter.

After a while the traffic cop at the intersection walked to within fifty feet of him and yelled to Garson to push that heap of his out of the way. Garson got out and looked around. The cop had gone back to his post; he had his own immediate business, to unsnarl the traffic jam enough to let cars go through Seventh Avenue. Garson tried to push his car, but he couldn't budge that ton and a half on wheels. He wiped a face wet with sweat as well as rain and looked at the people on the sidewalk. Not one of those hundreds of men moved to give him a hand.

Maybe they were dressed too fancy and the rain discouraged them. I don't know.

The fact remains that nobody there thought it was his particular business to help Garson.

Behind him, practically touching his rear bumper, was a coupe. The woman driver was the only one in it. Garson asked her for a push. She said she didn't want to break her clutch or transmission, she wasn't sure which, and she lit a cigarette and waited for something to happen so she could move on.

Garson returned to his car and stood a while in the rain. Then he got into the car and got behind the wheel. If nobody worried about him, why should he? He was comfortable.

Eventually the snarl untangled itself. Cars swung around him. He was still blocking a good section in front of Carnegie Hall, but nobody seemed willing to step into the rain to help him, so nothing was done about it.

Some ten or fifteen minutes after he'd got stuck, he tried the starter again, and the motor turned over. A flooded carburetor, probably. John Garson drove home.

At nine o'clock that same evening my squad and I were in Isabel Lewis' apartment—on official business.

There were plenty of witnesses to give us an idea of what had happened. It was generally agreed by the neighbors that at ten after eight the battle between her and the man had stopped, and that after a fifteen minute silence—or about twenty-five after eight—she was heard to scream. Nobody was sure whether she screamed with rage or was

beaten, and nobody seemed to want to horn in on what seemed to be none of his or her business.

A few minutes later, though, a man and woman next door heard her moan. That made it a little too much to stay out of. The man found the door unlocked. He went in, and there was Isabel Lewis on the floor with a carving knife in her. She was too far gone to talk, and she was dead before the ambulance arrived.

It wasn't hard for us to find out who the man was she'd had the battle with. Nobody had seen him come or go—there was an automatic elevator—but she was heard to call him John during the argument. In a drawer we found passionate letters to her signed John, and there was his full name and his address on the envelopes. So we picked John Garson up in his home in Queens, and he freely admitted that he had been in her apartment.

It looked like an open and shut case. The way we saw it, fifteen minutes after he and Isabel Lewis had stopped shouting at each other, he'd gone into the kitchenette for a carving knife and slipped it between her ribs.

But his story was that he'd been there only until ten after eight. Where had he been at the time of the murder? Stuck in his car in front of Carnegie Hall.

A perfect alibi.

Except that nobody had seen him there. Nobody had seen him go down the elevator and walk to his car, and nobody had seen him in front of Carnegie Hall. Hundreds of people had looked at him, but not as an individual to be identified later. He'd been a shape in the dark and the rain, a shadowy head in a car.

There had been the traffic cop. A stalled car? Sure, cars were stalling all the time. He had all he could do attending to his business, which was directing traffic. Besides, if he did recall one particular stalled car at eight-thirty that night, he hadn't come close enough for a good look at Garson or the car.

That left the woman Garson had asked to push his car with her car. The newspapers helped us find her. She read that we were looking for her and got in touch with headquarters.

She recalled the incident. But to her the man in the stalled car had only been somebody who had stood in the rain beside her own car, without identity except as a male. As for the make of that car, she couldn't distinguish one from another. And she was vague about the time; for all she knew, it might have been as late as nine o'clock, so at any rate she couldn't have alibied him.

The fact was that everything was against Garson. He'd been in Isabel Lewis' apartment; he'd been jealous; he'd quarreled loudly with her. It was still an open and shut case.

WELL, I never before heard anybody curse anything as bitterly as Garson cursed New York. Because if one person among those hundreds had helped him push his car, he would have had his alibi. Or if the traffic cop had come close enough to give him a hand or at least speak to him, the cop would have been able to identify him.

But there he was, with what at first had seemed a terrific alibi, right there in the sight of hundreds of people in a conspicuous spot, and it didn't amount to a hill of beans because every last one of those people was minding his own business.

When Garson stopped cursing, he started to think. He told me that he was convinced that the murderer was Clarence Hannen, Isabel's other boy friend. Both he and Hannen had been two-timed by her with each other. Garson had let off steam by telling her off, Hannen by slipping a knife into her. Anyway, that was Garson's idea.

So we picked up Clarence Hannen in his home in Brooklyn. He claimed that at the time of the murder he was in his room writing letters. Prove it? He lived with his sister and she had been out that evening, but he didn't have to prove anything. That was up to us.

(Continued on page 130)

HIGH VOLTAGE

Homicide

LEE BASSLER brought his truck to a cautious, sliding stop by the curb. He climbed out of the cab, and stood for a moment braced against the wind, head lowered toward the icy rain that was silver-plating trees and wires and buildings. He squinted an appraising glance at the swaying cables overhead, estimating how much more ice they could bear before they came down. His face was set; he was frowning as he ducked into the lunchroom.

Bert, the sallow-faced counterman, brought coffee in a heavy white mug and put it on the counter in front of Lee. "Nice weather, huh?" he said.

"Nice weather to be inside."

The coffee stung his mouth pleasantly. It brought a small revival of feeling to his chilled body, so that after a moment he unzipped his heavy jacket and shoved the earmuffed cap back off his forehead. He was bone-tired, and the shift was only two hours old.

Bert leaned his elbows on the counter and watched the rain freeze on the window screen. He said idly: "We don't hardly ever get through a winter without one of these danged ice storms. 'Member last year?"

"I'll say I remember!"

One of the worst, last year. An east wind howling down the gorge, freezing onto everything it touched. Electric lines grew from thin strands to great ropes and cables of glittering crystal, pulled crashing down by their own weight. Bassler, and all the repair men of the Midstate Power Company, had worked thirty-six hours without relief. Live wires writhed and sputtered in the city streets—whole sections of town blacked out—transformers and booster stations failed under crushing overloads.

He finished his coffee slowly, refusing to think of the moment when the cup would be empty and he would go back to the truck and open the two-way radio. He did not know what kind of trouble would be waiting for him, but he knew there would be trouble. Three hundred sixty days out of the year he ran into nothing tougher than a burned out stove or a melted fuse box. Then it came up ice, and things went to hell in a hand-basket.

THE dispatcher on the radio answered his call with the brisk unconcern of a man who has an indoor job on a bad night.

"Got a soft one for you," he said.

Troubleshooting is a lineman's job, but Lee Bassler figured murder was too much. Yet live wires and dead men sometimes go together. Take the night of the ice storm—and the incident of the baffling blonde of Barton Street.



By
HENRY
NORTON

"Juice off at 1010 Barton Street. Customer's name is Phillips. I haven't got any other complaints from the neighborhood, so it's probably a one-house failure. Lead wire down, maybe, or fuse burned out."

"Quit quarterbacking!" Lee said. "I'll find out what it is when I get there."

It was ten blocks to the trouble, and it took him almost ten minutes to make it. The streets were deepening sheets of ice now, and the chains on the emergency truck clattered and whirred on the frozen surface. He put the emergency light to flashing and inched past the two or three cars that appealed for help as he went by. Normally, he'd have time to stop, but tonight he had enough to do on his own job, without taking on more.

He found 1010 Barton, and it looked like more than a one-house job. All the adjoining houses were dark, and he could see no sign of trouble on the lead-in wire. Using a hand flash to pick his way up the icy steps, he punched the doorbell. The door opened at once.

"Power company," Lee said.

"It's about time," said Mr. Phillips. "You've been darn near—" He looked at his watch in the light of Lee's flash. "Well, it seemed long enough!"

Lee Bassler's fist came sledging against the man's mouth and Connor sprawled on the floor.

"What seems to be wrong?"

"Juice is off, that's what's wrong!" Mr. Phillips was a chubby little man, silhouetted in the feeble yellow light of an old-fashioned kerosene lamp. His tone was one of great indignation. "Lights, radio, stove—hey, how come the doorbell rang?"

"Dry cell batteries," said Lee Bassler, and pushed inside. "Let's have a look, mister. I've got a lot of calls waiting on this one."

The trouble was not inside, and it wasn't a one-house job. He found that after he'd donned climbing irons and kicked his way up the ice-sheathed pole across the street to find a burned-out transformer. Some vast drain of power had burned it out, he thought, and the trouble might still exist, but under these conditions, it'd be better to have a new transformer in first. He radioed for a heavier truck, and in a half hour's time the new transformer was in place and ready. He cut in power, and in a dozen houses across the street light sprang into being.

Bassler was stepping off the pole, and the large truck had reloaded and gone, when the woman ran out of the house across the street. She was slim, apparently young, and she wore only a low-cut evening dress. She ran out into the front yard and stood a moment looking back at the house, while wind and rain tore at her. Lee Bassler started across the street toward her.

It wasn't the Phillips house, he saw, but the one next door. No lights had come on at the 1010 address, but here where the woman had come running out there was a blaze of light from every window—even the porch light was on, touching the shrubs and trees of the yard with glittering crystal fire.

She saw him as she crossed the street. She turned then and ran back toward the house. Lee followed, impelled now by the oddity of her behavior. He caught up with her on the porch of the house, and she whirled and faced him defiantly.

"What's wrong?" he said.

"Nothing!"

She was already soaked to the skin, shivering in the icy wind. Under different circumstances she might have been beautiful. Even now, with her hair plastered across her face and her skin glistening and reddened by the lash of the storm, she was not ugly, and her filmy dress clung faithfully to an extraordinarily handsome body.

"Then if nothing's wrong you'd better get back in the house," Bassler said. "You aren't dressed for weather."

He turned away, regretting the vague impulse that had taken him across the street to her. He had enough to do without trying to help crazy dames. He had taken only a step away when she said: "Please, wait!"

He stopped and looked back at her.

She was shivering, and there was something very close to panic in the set of her mouth and the shine of her eyes. Her lips fumbled unsuccessfully for words.

"Look!" he said. "Get inside! You'll kill youself standing around half-dressed!"

He took her arm, and she shook him free in a sudden movement, opened the door and went in. The door came crashing shut behind her. Lee stared at it a moment, and then with a shake of his head he went back to the truck, and the job.

THE job grew into a shattering montage of ice and wind and fallen wires, and it was well after midnight before he again had time to stop by Bert's and gulp down a cup of the man's bitter, scalding coffee. Then, while he inhaled the steamy, grease-scented warmth of the lunchroom, his mind went back to the baffling blonde of Barton street.

Abruptly he finished the coffee and went out to the truck. He turned the motor over, roaring, and went away from the curb so fast that his wheels skidded crazily and sent him plunging out into the street. For Lee had just remembered something.

It's hard to burn out a transformer—normally it's one of the fuse plugs in the

house that lets go. But once in a while, when a sudden, tremendous, searing overload hits the wire, the transformer burns out too. And one of the few times Lee could remember such a load coming onto the line was the time an electric heater had fallen into a bathtub and electrocuted a woman.

He brought the little truck to a sliding stop in front of the house where the girl had come out. His steps crackled across the growing sheet of ice from the sidewalk to the door. There were still lights on inside, and he punched the bell impatiently. He waited only an instant before ringing again, hearing a deep-toned chime from within—confident that no one could sleep through it, and determined that no one should.

It was a man who answered the door—a timid-appearing young man with a wispy moustache and white eyebrows. He wore a smoking jacket belted tightly around his waist, and was yawning hugely as the door opened, although there was no great sleepiness in his pale blue eyes.

"Light company," Bassler said.

The man said: "What about it?"

"What's your trouble here?"

"Trouble? What trouble?"

"I got no time to guess with you," said Lee. "I got a call from the company to come here. They tell me you need a trouble man."

"We didn't call anybody."

Lee Bassler tried to be patient, remembering the frightened face of the girl. "You don't always have to call," he explained. "Sometimes the trouble shows on a transformer, or on the area drain at the substation, and then the company sends me out. So I'll have a look at your house wiring."

The pretense of sleepiness was gone now, and the man's eyes were sharp and a little wary. "No dice," he said shortly. "I ain't lettin' anybody in this time of night. We got lights enough to do us."

"Sure, and your house'll probably burn down before morning," Lee said. "Mister, the company sent me out to check your wiring. You wanna get me canned?"

"How do I know they sent you?"

"Here's my identification," Lee said. He showed the company folder with his photograph and thumbprint. "Or hell, call the company if you want."

For one breathless moment the man acted as if were going to act on that suggestion. He turned, and then came back to the door. "Oh, what the hell," he said. "Only make it snappy, will ya?"

"Won't take a minute," Lee promised.

He found the fuse box in the back entryway, and flashed his light on it. Several of the fuses, he saw, were a new type that would accommodate a big overload and not blow out. They were O.K. in some districts, but outlawed in this one. The company was used to that—if a service man got to keep all the pennies he found screwed in behind fuse plugs, it'd buy him a good many cigars in the course of a year.

"Nothing here," he said.

He reached for a door and pulled it open. Steps slanted down into darkness, and the soft hum of a furnace came from somewhere below. A three-switch panel was on the wall, and Lee kicked up the center toggle at a guess. Lights came on in the basement.

"New furnace?" Lee asked. Sometimes new furnaces proved too great a load for old wiring. Better to look for the common things first.

"Put in when the house was built," the man said. "You're wasting time going down there—"

His voice trailed off, for Lee Bassler was going on down the stairs, making surprisingly little noise on the steps, busy eyes picking up all the details of the house wiring.

The house was modern as most, but there were a few unshielded wires overhead. At first glance nothing was wrong with them. Lee picked out the heavier lines that would be carrying 220 volts for the range and the automatic water heater. Then he saw the severed wire with its bunchy, unprofessional taping job.

"Haywire," he muttered.

From above, the man said sharply: "Find anything?"

Without answering, Lee went to a door beneath the stairs and shoved it open. The room beyond was dark, but he could see the dim outline of a car. For an instant only his mind played with the idea of reaching, groping for a light switch. Then instead, he pressed the stud of his flashlight. The beam showed him an enclosed basement garage. The car parked in it was quietly expensive, its doors closed and motor off. But there was no time to look at that.

HUDDLED almost at Bassler's feet was the dark-clad body of a man. As Lee bent over, he could catch the faint sickening odor of scorched flesh. He spun the light beam upward, and knew how the man had died.

It was beautifully, dreadfully contrived. One end of the 220-volt line had been cut and brought back so that a shining finger of copper lay across the switch. It was impossible to reach for the toggle without bringing a hand against the bared wire. Lee looked down at the floor. Whether by custom or by plan, a steel drip pan was there, so that anyone reaching for the switch would be reaching for 220 volts of death.

Bassler caught the wire in insulated pliers and bent it up and out of reach. He backed out of the garage and bounded up the basement stairs. He took the lapels of the young man's smoking jacket in his fist.

"Who is it?" he said. "Who killed him?"

The man's eyes rolled. His mouth opened convulsively, and his weight sagged against Lee's arm. Lee shoved him into a chair and was reaching for the phone when the door chime boomed softly.

It was the chubby man from next door, the man named Phillips who stood revealed in the back entryway. Phillips said: "I came over to—" Then he recognized Lee Bassler, and his heavy jaw dropped.

"What are you doing here?" he said suspiciously.

"Man electrocuted in the basement," Lee said. "Come in and help me with this guy while I call the police."

"Good Lord," Phillips said. He came into the kitchen and stopped when he saw the young man. "Connor!" he said. "Then it must be McCready who was—"

"Middle-aged guy, dark overcoat."

"That's John McCready, all right," Phillips said. "I've warned him a time or two about monkeying with the wiring. You suppose that's what burned out the lights a few hours ago?"

Lee Bassler did not answer. He was busy at the phone, turned so that he could watch the man Phillips had called Connor. Rule one for a service man who ran into big trouble, was to call somebody to handle it. If you found a pole down or a transformer burned out, you called a big truck to help. If you found somebody who refused to pay charges, you called the credit office. If you found murder—but that wasn't on the list! Where in a lineman's job would you find murder?

You might find an element burned out of a range, or a water heater acting up, or a fuse box scorched, or a pipe conduit smoking. But murder—Well, Bassler, there it was in the basement below you. A death trap that a man who handled hot wire couldn't miss. And a dead man caught in it. And—take it easy now—a scared girl who'd run out in an ice storm earlier to get away from something in this house!

He said to the phone: "Homicide."

He said: "Send somebody to 1012 Barton. We got what looks like a murder out here. Me? The power man. Sure, I'll stick around."

He replaced the phone, and leaving Phillips with Connor, he began prowling through the house. Lights were on in the most improbable places: closets and halls, the typical trail of someone going through a dark house trying to find a light that worked. He came finally to a door behind which was darkness, but a light came on as soon as he pushed the door open.

"Uncle John? Ray?" said the girl's voice.

"Ray for what?" asked Bassler.

There was a stifled gasp and she sat up in bed staring at him. Lee had a moment to decide that his judgment about her looks had been O.K., before she clutched the down comforter up around her.

"What are you doing here?" she said angrily.

"Who's the dead guy in the basement?"

She screamed, then. It was soundless, but if ever a woman screamed with her eyes, with the back of her hand muting her mouth, this one did. Then, like an automaton, she got out of the bed. found a robe and slippers, and came stiffly toward Lee Bassler in the bedroom door. Something about her made Lee suddenly conscious of his heavy jacket, his furred cap, the heavy, dangling tools at his belt.

"Did you say dead?" she asked. Her voice was low, toneless. It was not so much self-possession as a sort of numbness or shock.

"Somebody rigged a switch in the basement," Lee told her bluntly. "It killed a man in a dark blue overcoat. He's got gray hair."

"Uncle John," she said.

"Who's Ray? Is that Connor?"

"Ray? What do you know about Ray?"

"You just asked if I was Ray!"

"Ray? Why, he's my—he's—"

"Husband?"

"We're—we were—we're supposed to be engaged."

"Looks like it," Lee Bassler said sourly. "You better get some clothes on, sis. I've called the cops."

THERE was a Sergeant Fogarty in charge of the squad arrived in a few minutes, a gray, quiet man with even teeth and a soft voice. The others with him accepted Bassler's warning about the wire, prowled about the house, and finally removed the body.

The body, in Fogarty's precise notes, became John McCready, who owned a small but very lucrative lumber brokerage. He was uncle to Helen McCready, the lovely who seemed to enjoy running bare-shouldered in ice storms. He was step-father to Ray Connor, who managed McCready's office and was engaged to McCready's niece. What Connor was doing in the house in a smoking jacket was something Lee Bassler could figure only too well. Lee didn't like it much, but the conclusion was inevitable.

"The transformer burned out about three hours ago," he told Fogarty. "I came out on the call and we fixed up the trouble. Just as I was leaving this girl came out of the house with nothing on."

Fogarty leaned forward, and Lee said: "Just a dress, I mean—no coat or anything. She was scared, no doubt about that. But I had plenty to do elsewhere, so I didn't waste any time. But here's the point—a man getting all that juice in the basement would pull enough current to burn out the transformer. So that must be what happened, and when it happened."

Fogarty nodded, looking through into the living room where the others waited with a couple of policemen. "It adds up that way," he said. "That'd explain why she was panicky enough to run outside, too. She's probably heavy in his will, and wanted the dough. Could she do that wiring job?"

"Anybody could," Lee said. "But more'n likely this Connor guy was helping her. They're engaged, not to use a stronger word."

Fogarty lifted an eyebrow, but Lee sensed that his surprise could be as much at Lee's vehemence as at the information.

"If he was helping," the sergeant said, "why would she get scared enough to run away from him out of the house?"

"Ask her." Lee Bassler was tired—and just now, he had a bad taste in his mouth. He wanted another cup of Bert's bitter coffee and a good night's sleep. Maybe that would take his mind off a silken, silvery, slender body in a soaked evening gown.

"I will," said Fogarty.

Lee stood up and Fogarty flicked a finger at him.

"Stick around," he said. "I can use you here. Otherwise you'd be out in the

storm, so why not get smart and take it easy."

"I'll have to call in," Lee said.

It took quite a bit of explaining to the dispatcher. On a night when every available man had twice as much as he could do, why was Bassler involved in a murder investigation, three hours after his duties in that neighborhood were completed. Lee did a lame job of explaining, and the dispatcher, since he could think of no practical way to call Bassler away, silenced the truck. Bassler turned away from the phone to face a gentle mocking grin from Sergeant Fogarty.

"You don't mind my eavesdropping on your conversation, do you?" he asked. "Because I was a little puzzled about your being here myself, if your call was three hours ago and all done."

Lee cursed himself mentally, groping for any logical explanation as they went in to join the others. He stopped Fogarty in the door.

"I came back because it looked queer, the girl running out with no wraps," he said. "I got to thinking about another time that same transformer burned out, when an electric heater fell in a—"

"Tell them the truth!"

LEE BASSLER turned in amazement to look at the girl's pale face, at the blue eyes with the bright blaze of anger in them.

"This man's mixed up in Uncle's death," she said. "He was hanging around here earlier. I'll bet Ray hired him to fix that wire. Ray couldn't do it himself!"

Ray Connor emitted a squawk of indignant protest. He jumped up and marched across the room to stand in front of his fiancée, and the words that tore from his lips were anything but affectionate.

"Try to blame it on me, will you, you tramp!" he said thinly. "You're the one gets all his money! You're the one got this jerk to fix up the kill! And I can guess how you coaxed him to do it, too, you little—"

The girl jumped up and slapped him at about the same time Lee Bassler's fist came sledging against the man's mouth. Connor sprawled on the floor. There, safe on his back, he went on cursing until Fogarty nudged his ribs with a toe and told him to shut up.

"You gonna let 'em beat me up?" Connor demanded.

"Do it myself, if you don't watch your talk!"

Fogarty grinned at Lee Bassler. "I don't know which one of 'em's right," he said, "but it looks like you're a good bet either way."

"Don't be silly," Lee said. "I been on call. I can account for every bit of my time."

"You're sure?" asked Fogarty.

And Bassler did not answer, for he knew that the wiring could have been done easily in any five minute period between his other calls. The night that had seemed so busy to him had plenty of holes in it for murder.

"You'll play hell proving I did it," he said.

"The boys think it'd take a good electrician to fix up that death trap in the garage," Fogarty pointed out. "You don't make so much at your job you couldn't be hired for a chore like that. Or otherwise persuaded."

"I knocked Connor kicking for not much more than that remark," Bassler said quietly.

"Yes, you did," said Fogarty. "But I got a gun an' a sap, an' I'm not paid to let tough guys push me around. So don't crowd your luck, sonny."

"I think there's something here, officer," said Phillips then. "This is the same man who was out three hours ago to fix the transformer. And I saw his truck in the neighborhood an hour or so before that. So it's likely he was hired by one or both of these young people to put the fatal wire in place. After all, who would be certain of delivering a killing jolt besides a professional electrician?"

"Damn it, I wasn't even here!" said Connor. "I didn't get out here till the lights were back on! Helen had gone to bed, so I put on a smoking jacket and

sat down to wait for the old man. I thought he'd gone to a dinner."

Fogarty said: "How about it, Helen? Is he telling the truth?"

Reluctantly, the girl said: "He wasn't here. Uncle John started to go to his dinner just before the lights went off. I thought he'd gone. When the lights went out I thought it was a fuse, so I went to the back hall, and then I—I thought I heard something in the basement. I was frightened, but I couldn't find a candle or a flashlight or anything. Then when the lights came on it startled me so I ran out without even stopping to think."

"You can do better than that!" Fogarty said.

"I've always been afraid of darkness," she said.

"First I've heard of it," Connor sneered.

LEE was grappling with an idea—something growing so rapidly in his mind that he scarcely heard the girl say: "You're a filthy liar, Ray. You know I despise you, don't you? That I'd never have said I'd marry you except Uncle John wanted me to so bad? Now I'd rather die!"

"You've got a good chance," said Connor.

Fogarty said: "The cute part is, neither one of you needed to be here. You simply leave the back door unlocked, and tell Bassler here the time you want that switch rigged up. He can pop in and do it, and nobody'd give it a second thought. Repair trucks, mailmen, milk drivers—they come and go and nobody notices."

"That's right, officer," Phillips said. "And I still think nobody but an electrician would be sure of the killing power of the set-up. And if it failed to kill, it'd be an awful boomerang!"

"Hey, that's right!" Lee said suddenly. "I just happened to think. This same transformer was burned out a few months ago by an electrocution!"

Fogarty said: "So what?"

"So what Fatso was saying here," Lee said, and jerked a thumb at Phillips. "Nobody that hadn't had some experience would know enough to use the 220-volt line and put a ground plate down."

"You tryin' to hang yourself?" Fogarty asked.

"Listen," said Lee. "Anybody that went through that first electrocution—a woman in a bathtub—would know how to rig another. And he'd know the transformer'd go out!"

"I still don't get it."

"When we fixed that transformer, I went to the Phillips house next door. He had a kerosene lamp burning—didn't even have a light switch on so that the light would come on when the current came back."

Fogarty looked suddenly interested in Bassler's remarks.

"If the lights went off in your house, where would you find a kerosene lamp?" Bassler demanded. "Hell, like the girl here, most people can't even find a candle or a flashlight. So who knew the lights were going out? Who rigged McCready's electrocution?"

"You trying to say I came over here and killed my next door neighbor?" demanded Phillips.

"I'm saying nothing," Lee said. "But I'm going to call the company and find out if it wasn't your wife that got electrocuted in the bathtub. Then I'm going to call the paper and see if she didn't have quite a lot of money."

Phillips broke then, turning swiftly to the door only to face a broad, blue-clad chest. The chubby little man hid his face in his hands and sank slowly to his knees. . . .

"Sure we found motive," Fogarty told Lee next day. "You can always find motive when you know who the killer is. Phillips'd lost most of his wife's money in a lumber deal with McCready, but all McCready had was his verbal agreement. He figured to save several thousand dollars with McCready dead. But you spotted him without knowing that. Too bad there was no reward!"

Lee thought about a girl in a silver evening gown.

"I'll get my reward," he said.



CONCERTO

By MICHAEL SUTTON

CHAPTER ONE

Soft Lights and Sweet Murder

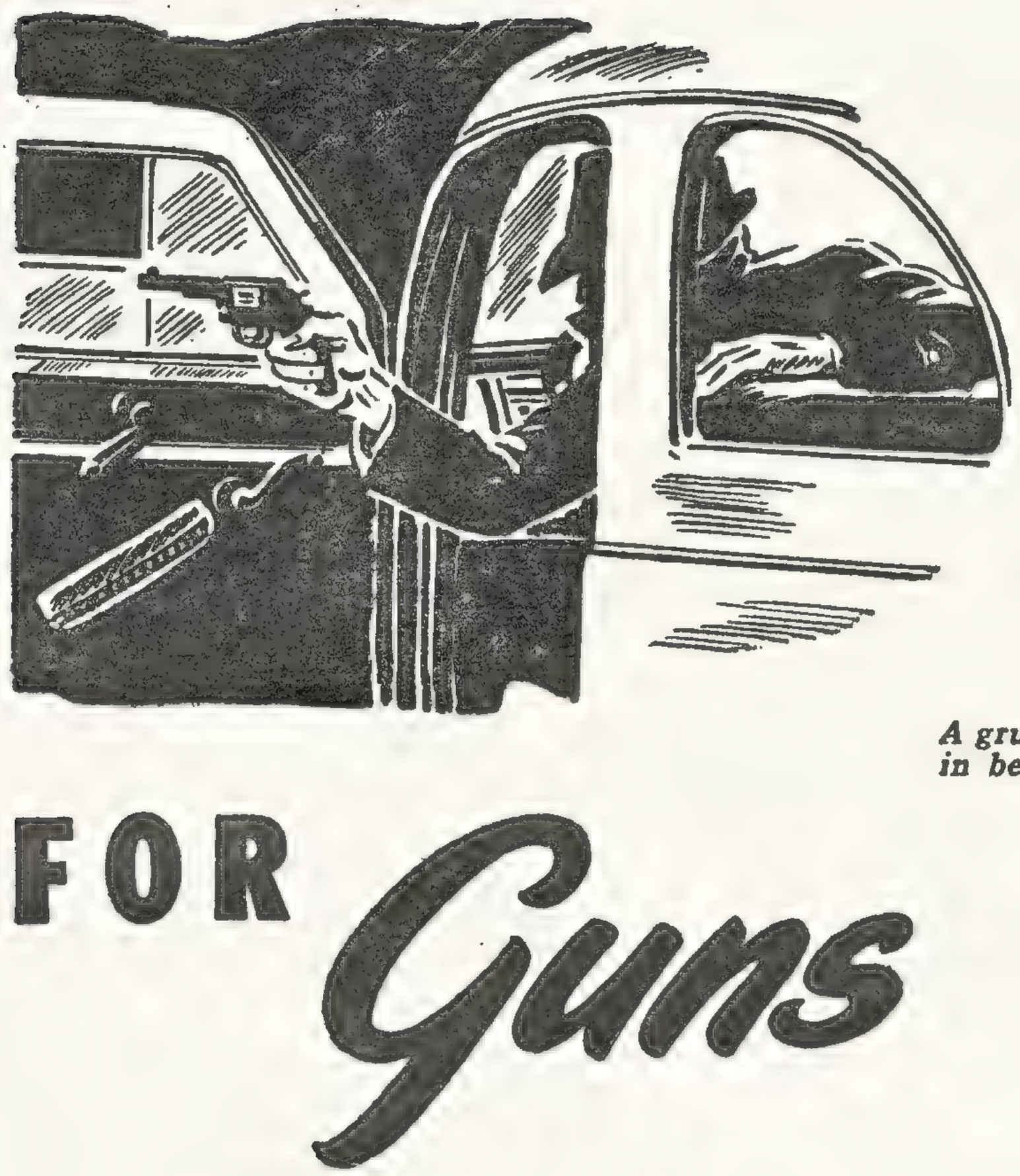
A GUSTY wind boomed bleakly against the courthouse windows. When I got outside, trees were thrashing about in it and raindrops were pelting away the last dry patches on the sidewalk.

At the Ventura city limits, the sky opened up. Heavy sheet rain slogged the car and sluiced flatly down the windshield for over an hour. By the time it slacked off, I was still twenty miles from Los Angeles and half starved. My strapwatch said seven-thirty.

I yawned, just to break the monotony, and fished for a cigarette. Suddenly, a pair of oncoming headlights appeared to be swerving over the centerline at me.

I hit my brakes. My tires agonized on the wet pavement. The heap skidded until a rear wheel caught on rough shoulder gravel. It slewed the other way. A front wheel grabbed. I bounced and jolted and ground to a stop. A blinding glare raked my windshield and a sleek block-long convertible with a snugly

Johnny Dillon was just looking for a bite to eat at the Blue Valley Inn—and never guessed that murder topped the menu. Not that he disapproved the killing of Harvey Costain, for compared to the notorious mouthpiece a rat was the King of Beasts. But he did think the killer showed very poor taste in using Johnny's rod for the job.



A gruff voice said: "Get in before you drown."

FOR *Guns*

fitted light-colored top swooshed through a puddle a few yards ahead of my front bumper, and careened up a side road towards the foothills.

I cursed its vanishing tail-lights at the top of my lungs. After a while, I stopped that and got a cigarette lit and kicked my stalled motor alive. The windshield wipers began to function again.

Two fat whitewashed adobe pillars guarded the side road. A rustic sign, arched between these, said Blue Valley Inn. I backed up, shifted, crawled ahead and swung in beneath the arch.

The road twisted, dipped and climbed through a grove of gnarled live oak trees, for about a quarter of a mile, to a narrow mesa, close against the foothills. In the middle of a lot of neglected garden stood a rambling old frame hotel with white scrolled porches, tricky little balconies above and red shingled turrets. A single light on a high pole shone dimly on the wet tops of a cluster of parked cars. I found a slot, next to a long black convertible with a light-colored top, and tooled into it.

The rain was little more than a drifting mist now. I got out of the heap. There was nobody in the convertible. Its radiator shell was still warm to my hand. I opened the door on the driver's side. The name in the registration holder on the steering-shaft was Harvey L. Costain. It had a faintly familiar ring—and a Brentwood Heights address. I clicked the convertible door shut.

A graveled path led past rows of empty tennis courts and the dark ripple of water in a deserted swimming pool. I went up steps to a wide veranda. Draped windows leaked light on porch furniture stacked along the inner edge of the veranda out of the rain. A pair of

tall double doors, in from the steps, had long ovals of etched glass in them and light behind the glass. One of the doors was opened from the inside by a tall Negro in a white mess jacket and gloves.

Soft lights and muted rumba music filled the lobby. It had solid old beams overhead and dark paneled walls. Logs blazed in a huge stone fireplace on the left. Across the room, beside a desk with its switchboard and mailboxes, wide carpeted stairs went up into darkness. Here and there on the polished oak floor were white bear rugs in front of tapestried lounges. About half of the customers wore evening clothes.

The tall Negro flashed teeth at me, nodded and closed the door with a delicate flourish. A sloe-eyed check girl with beautiful naked shoulders took my hat and gave me a slip of pasteboard for it and a look that froze the leer on my face. I fumbled out a dollar bill and dropped it on a plate. The music seemed to be coming from a shadowy room beyond a draped arch.

I ambled that way.

A hard-faced captain of waiters placed a fistful of leather-bound menus against my chest and said: "No tables. Sorry."

"I'm hungry enough to eat off the floor," I told him. "In fact, I could almost eat the floor, with a little mustard on it."

He was not amused. "Others are waiting," he sneered, and pawed the lobby with his eyes, crooked a finger at someone behind me.

"Will there be a table later?" I asked politely.

"Perhaps," he shrugged, and wheeled back into the blue shadows. Some people drifted past me, trailing him. I followed for a step or two and watched them get seated.

A gold light slashed the deep blue of the dining room and a guitar player in a green velvet suit got up from his place with the orchestra. Several couples were struggling around on a small space of floor in front of the band platform. The guitar player let his instrument hang by its silk tasseled neck cord and grabbed the floor microphone for some solo work. The gold spotlight gave him an embalmed appearance.

The captain of waiters came back.

"How about putting my name down?" I asked.

"Yes, of course," he said, raising his arm to signal again. I touched the arm, put enough weight on it to hold it down. "The name is John Dillon," I said. "Let's see you write it."

"I'll remember it," he snapped, and jerked his arm free.

"By the way, did Harvey Costain get here yet?" I asked.

His eyes defrosted. "Are you a friend of Mr. Costain, sir?"

I smiled coldly.

"Even Mr. Costain has to wait, we're that crowded," he said, apologetically. "He's in the cocktail lounge, if you care to join him, sir." He pointed to the far end of the dining room.

"Thanks," I said. "I'll wait there, but I'm eating alone tonight. Try this for speed." I passed him a tightly folded dollar bill and headed for the bar.

A DEEP-TONED wall speaker brought the orchestra into the cocktail lounge. I settled on a leather-cushioned bar stool. One of the white-clad barmen was busy among the tables. The other one was serving a big-shouldered, black-haired man at the end of the bar. A slender girl with dark hair tumbling in soft waves down the back of her pale dinner dress sat next to the big-shouldered man staring moodily into her empty cocktail glass.

A huge blunt-fingered hand gripped my arm. A heavy, handsome face topped by crisp curly blond hair grinned down at me. "As I live and breathe, it's Johnny Dillon. Long time no see. Where in hell you been keeping yourself, boy?"

"Well, well, Duke Mazonik. Hi, Duke," I said, shaking the big paw. "I've been here and I've been there. In the Army four years. In town almost six months now. How's police work?"

"Turned in my badge over a year ago." He spread both hands flat on the bar top. "I'm making *ten* times the dough now."

"Glad to hear it. The drinks are on you."

"Sure. They're on the house. Name yours."

"Don't tell me that you own this joint."

"Gosh, no. Tony Zarsella is boss here."

"Tony Zarsella? The gambler?"

"Yeah. You know him, huh?"

"About him," I said dryly. "He used to work for another gambler, a man named Lew Gannon, out on the Strip. As a croupier or dealer or something. I hardly remember it now, but there was some stink at the time. I heard Gannon fired Zarsella for making his tables pay too well. Don't ask me why."

"Aw, don't believe all you hear." Mazonik grinned again, a faintly sheepish grin this time. "He's in business for himself, now. Game rooms upstairs and everything. He's got a nice setup here. I kind of keep an eye on things for him."

A barman drifted over. He rested both hands on the inner edge of the bar and lowered his head and looked up through his eyebrows at me. "Rye, straight," I said. Mazonik nodded and held up two fingers.

"What brings you to this den of evil?" Mazonik asked amiably.

"Hunger and thirst and a close shave," I said.

"You sound like you've had a couple snorts already."

"I had business up Ventura way today and a near head-on crash on the way home—out where your road turns in off the valley boulevard, only I didn't know it was your road at the time. I got stalled there. Then I saw the sign and figured maybe I could get a little food up this way—so here I am."

"Think of that. Still in the private eye racket?"

I nodded. Shot glasses clicked on the bar in front of us. They looked to be about twice the usual size and I said so. Mazonik winked at me. The barman filled the glasses to the brim without batting an eye and went away again.

"Lead in your gun," Mazonik said cheerfully, and picked up his drink. I touched the other one. "Who is Harvey Costain?" I asked.

He lowered his drink and set it back on the bar, very gently. His eyes narrowed quizzically. "Is there a guy in your racket who *don't* know?" he asked. in a soft, almost husky voice.

"Sure," I said. "Me. The name's familiar, but I can't quite place it."

"The mouthpiece," he grunted. "You could almost spit in his eye from where you sit, only we don't allow that sort of thing in here."

My memory sharpened as I looked along the bar at the big-shouldered man next to the girl in the pale dinner dress. Harvey Costain had just begun to make a name for himself as the highest bidder's attorney when the Japs hit Pearl Harbor. Now, he had a rather puffy countenance and looked somewhat drunk, in a quietly sullen way. He was too far away to hear our conversation, but I lowered my voice just to be on the safe side.

"He has nice taste," I said. "Looks like she's with him. anyway. His wife?"

"Yeah, she's with him," the big blond man grumbled in my ear. "She ain't his wife, though. A torcher. Calls herself Gail Tremaine."

The girl turned her head, met my stare for a brief moment, looked into her drink again. Her lips moved. Costain faced her suddenly. Even in that dim light you could see the mean glitter in his eyes. He planted a rough hand on her shoulder and pushed her backwards off the bar stool. She yelped, not loudly, and her body hit the lounge floor with a muffled thud. Women at the tables gasped. Costain curled his lip at them.

By the time I reached that end of the bar, the girl was on her feet, brushing absently at the folds of her skirt. Costain saw me behind him and stood up.

"I'm kind of old-fashioned," I drawled. "I think you have the silliest puss I ever saw in my life."

"It'll pay you to mind your own business, farmer," he sneered thickly.

I rapped a light left jab into his ribs. His chin came down. I cocked my right

hand and started to throw it. A bolt of lightning cracked the walls of the cocktail lounge and hit me in the head. It flared through me. Thunder trailed it. The thunder rumbled, died. I found myself high in the air above the earth, falling rapidly. I hit the ground with a hard jar. It got dark and cold.

A tiny moon appeared in the sky. It began to grow. It grew until its rays spread a pinkish white glow over everything. Then a cloud drifted across the sky and blotted it out. I opened my eyes.

Gleaming white even teeth hung a couple of feet above my face. Heavy latin lips framed the teeth. The features above the lips were dark and latin. Hard black intelligent eyes went with the features. They watched me briefly, went away. Lamplight smacked me full in the eyes. I groaned, turned my head. My neck felt stiff.

Duke Mazonik's blond wool and tanned handsome face leaned over me and said: "How you feeling, boy?"

"Terrible," I growled. "Get the number of that truck?"

"Strictly corny," he chuckled. "You're O.K., John."

I sat up.

WE WERE in a long wide room with dark drapes over a row of windows and, across from them, a cheery blaze in a small neat brick fireplace. There was some rather modernistic furniture around. It included a large shiny walnut desk and a leather davenport. I was on the davenport.

The dark latin-faced man came over and shoved about three fingers of amber fluid in the bottom of a tall glass at me. I took it. My throat warmed up as the amber fluid slid down. A glow filled my stomach, spread, eased the stiffness in my neck. I gave him back the glass, rubbed my mouth with my hand.

"Meet the boss, John," Mazonik said. "Tony Zarsella, Johnny Dillon. I'd like for you guys to like each other."

I nodded, stood up, touched the side of my head, winced. A lump the size of a robin's egg had risen behind my left ear. It burned under the pressure of my fingers.

"What did hit me?" I asked.

The big blond man grinned sheepishly again as he pulled a leather covered pocket sap out of his coat. He held it up for me to look at. "Me," he admitted.

"What in hell for?" I snapped.

"Duke tells me you're a private dick," Zarsella said silkily.

"Yeah, and he used to be a cop," I growled. "Also it might've been a nice day today, except it rained. So I get hit in the head."

"A good dick needs a cool head," Zarsella remarked dryly.

"Is that so?" I snarled. "Well, mine's been O.K. so far."

"Take it easy, boy," Mazonik said earnestly. "I had to do it."

"A good dick should control his temper better," Zarsella said. He sat down behind the big walnut desk. Mazonik dropped the sap back in his pocket, showed me the palms of his hands and shrugged at me. I rubbed my head and winced again.

"Mr. Harvey Costain spends a great deal of money here," Zarsella said, almost musingly. Among other things, the desk had a hand-beaten copper humidor on it. He lifted the lid, plucked out a thick cigar, rolled it gently between his fingers, sniffed at it, replaced the lid. "In my business, it doesn't pay to let roughnecks maul the heavy spenders."

"So that's it," I said nastily. "So Harvey Costain can blow his nose on the crap tables all he wants to, as long as he blows plenty of the long green along with what else comes out. And if he feels like it, he can push his lady friend in the face, too, huh?"

"He never pushed her in the face," Mazonik said, in a bleak tone of voice.

"He pushed her," I said harshly. "What do you want—blood?"

"It was *his* lady friend," Zarsella drawled. "It never pays to mix in other people's troubles, Dillon."

"You guys make me sick," I sneered. "Let me out of here."

"Gosh, don't be sore at me, boy," Mazonik pleaded. His face was flushed. His eyes looked almost angry. Hard lights glinted in them.

"Where's the fire escape?" I growled. "I smell smoke."

Zarsella smiled thinly, shrugged. Mazonik stared bleakly at me and turned his head, finally, and jutted his chin at one of several doors the room had. I walked over, yanked it open and went out.

Closed doors with nothing but thick silence behind them lined the hallway on both sides. It was still too early for the sporting crowd to show. The hallway ended at a wide carpeted stairs. A chubby, pink-faced man wearing a tuxedo sat at the PBX switchboard behind the lobby desk. He raised his eyes and watched me come down the stairs. The hard-faced head waiter was standing in the dining room archway watching nothing.

In the dimness behind him, rumba notes still fluttered around like bats in the rafters. I slapped my hat check down so hard the slot-eyed check girl almost lost her haughty manner. She handed me my hat without dropping it. The tall Negro opened the door for me with the same smile and delicate flourish as before.

A sudden gust of wind almost blew me off the veranda. It was raining again. Hunger still gnawed inside me. My stomach felt as if it had shrunk to the size of a dried prune. I settled my hat around my ears, hunched up my coat collar and lunged down the veranda steps.

The light on the high pole was almost invisible and the graveled path was an inch under water now. I reached the heap in a hurry and stopped dead in my tracks.

Clutching my left door handle for support, the girl in the pale dinner dress was just standing there, staring into the long black convertible with the light-colored top. Her other hand clutched some sort of wrap, or coat, which dragged on the ground. The rain had plastered her hair to her head and the sides of her face. Her dress was soaked. It looked as thin as paint.

I peered into the convertible. Harvey Costain was in there, hunched over the steering wheel, out cold. I jerked my door open, grabbed the girl by the arm. She shuddered. A whimpering noise gurgled in her throat. She dropped the wrap. I picked it up.

"Inside, fast," I barked. "You'll have six kinds of pneumonia. I'll get you home. Hurry it up."

She didn't move, or speak. I threw the wrap into the heap and pushed her in after it. Then I slammed the door and turned back to the convertible, climbed inside.

Something cold that wasn't rain water trickled down my spine when I touched Costain. I shook him, put a hand under his chin, heaved him against the back of the seat. He was all dead weight. Half of the whites of his eyes showed starkly beneath his partially lowered eyelids. His coat lapels were parted enough for me to see the dark stain on his white shirt front.

He was not drunk. He was dead.

I let go of him. He flopped forward onto the steering wheel again. His nose hit the chromium horn ring. The horn let go, blasting the whispering quiet of the parking lot into shreds. I jumped at him, pushed his face off the wheel. The horn quit.

I found the dash-light switch, gave it a twist. I couldn't find any guns, large or small, so I doused the switch and got out of the convertible.

The girl didn't look at me as I slid under the wheel of my own car. Her large, dark, frightened eyes stared straight ahead through the windshield. She was shaking like a last lost leaf in a storm. Her breath came and went noisily between chattering teeth.

"Who killed him?" I asked sharply, pressing the starter.

She didn't answer. I switched on my lights, backed out of the slot, shifted gears. "O.K.," I said. "Where do you live?"

Still no answer. She looked half dead herself. I gunned the motor.

CHAPTER TWO

Shower of Death

A YOUNGISH man wearing thick-lensed eyeglasses, with a stethoscope protruding from the side pocket of his white jacket, came into the small waiting room. There was a printed form card in his hand.

I picked my shirt, dry now, off the steam radiator and put it on and began buttoning it up.

"Shock and exposure," the man said. "What's her name?"

"Gail Tremaine," I told him. "That's what the registration holder in her car had on it. I forget the address."

"A couple of fanny bruises," he said, in a dry professional voice. "Otherwise she doesn't seem to have been hurt. What happened?"

"Another car sideswiped her, up near the pass on Cahuenga. I don't think she was hurt much, either. A tire blew out on her car. That's hell, a night like this."

He nodded and stared thoughtfully at me, flicking a corner of the form card with his thumbnail. I finished buttoning my shirt and tucked it into my pants.

"I have to make some kind of a report," he said. "How close were you?"

"To the accident?"

He nodded again.

"Fifty yards or so. I passed her and then had to back up. The other car didn't stop. I wasn't the other car, if that's what you are thinking."

He shook his head. "Not at all," he said. "I'd like to have your name, though—just for the records." He unshipped a pen.

I dug a card out of my wallet—not one of mine. I didn't even remember the face of the man who had given it to me. The medico read it, placed it carefully on the table beside the form card and began copying the name. When he had done that, he waved the form card in the air to set the ink. I shrugged into my coat, buttoned that, and reached for my hat.

He re-read what he had written. "A. A. Steele, Insurance Indemnity Limited, eh? Canadian?"

"Not me," I said. "I'm just their L.A. contact."

"I see. No idea where she lives, eh?"

"No idea," I said, truthfully.

He frowned, faintly. "She must have friends," he said. He chewed his lip, thought, then shrugged and said: "She ought to be all right by morning. I don't suppose we'll have to bother you about anything."

"Thanks," I said. He gave me back the insurance man's card. I stuffed it into my pocket and went into the corridor and along it to big glass doors at the end.

I stood outside, under the sheltering canopy, to light a cigarette and watch the rain for a moment. The night air had a smell of dead leaves and moist earth. A thousand drops hit to form wet little humps on a lighted square of pavement. Water gurgled in the gutters. I shrugged up my collar again and dashed out from the shelter.

The door of my car opened before I touched it. A gun muzzle poked itself into my face. A gruff voice said: "Get in before you drown." The gun receded. I slid in under the wheel, pulled the door shut. The face beside me was just a vague blur in the depths of a raincoat collar under a pulled-down hat brim.

There was nothing vague or blurry about the gun. It was like a rock in his hand. "Where to?" I asked him.

"Drive on," he grunted. "Turn when told."

The car was pointed north, toward Hollywood Boulevard, so I tooled away from the curb and we crept forward. A starter whined, behind us. Headlights came on and crawled along on our tail. At the boulevard, I got a grunt and a wave of the gun, so I turned left and drove west.

The tag hung on about thirty yards back. Two more turns put us on Santa Monica, going west again. A traffic light stopped us. The tag closed in and became a close harsh glare on my wet rear windows. "Friends?" I asked.

No answer.

A block and a half beyond the La Cienega intersection, where the interurban car tracks split the street into a double right-of-way, there was a wide, empty lot beside an abandoned store building. The gun nudged my ribs. "This is it, bo," the gunman growled. I swung into the empty lot.

We parked in the darkness of a dilapidated storage shed at the rear. "Out," he said. I got out on my side. He followed me with the gun. The tag didn't come into the shed. I saw its lights cruise past the empty lot. Then the wall of the store building cut them off.

RAIN drummed on the roof of the shed, leaked through here and there and dripped steadily into ground puddles. The gunman stepped close to me, patted me over. I wasn't wearing a gun, but before heading for Ventura that day, I had tucked one into the stash-away holster up under the dash panel of my car, just above the steering shaft. He made no move to search the car.

"Mind telling me what this is all about?" I asked him.

"Keep the lip buttoned and nobody gets hurt," he growled.

"That's nice to know," I said. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Naw," he grunted. "Go ahead."

I dug out another cigarette. Even in the match flare, I couldn't see much of his face. I lit the cigarette, smoked quietly until I had finished it, dropped it and stepped on it. About five minutes more passed and then another pair of headlights came along the street, the way we had come, turned into the empty lot, but did not come back to the shed. They blinked off and the motor of the car died. Its door opened. A figure climbed out of it and plodded toward the shed.

The gunman raised his voice enough to reach the figure.

"All set?"

"Yeah." The figure halted and spoke in a muffled tone.

The gunman dangled my ignition keys in front of my face.

"These'll be out there on the sidewalk," he said. "Don't try no funny stuff until we're gone." His gun covered me while he backed out of the shed. The other man made a low-voiced remark. The gunman turned and the two of them ran.

I jumped for my car, shoved my hand up under the dash panel. The stashed holster was still there—empty. The gun was gone. Out in front of the store building, a car motor roared briefly and faded. After that it was quiet again and lonely and there was only the whisper of the gusting wind and the rain beating on the roof of the shed.

My keys were on the city sidewalk all right. By the time I found them. in front of the store, I was soaked to the skin. I went back into the side lot and walked over to the other parked car. It was Harvey Costain's convertible. I opened the door for a brief moment, saw him still in there, still very very dead, and closed it again. Then I went back and got my car out of the shed and drove home.

A long hot steamy shower took the ice out of my bones. I stood in it until my pores were all open and the perspiration was oozing freely. In a little while my muscles all felt long and loose and limber. I spent a quick minute under cold water and turned it off. When I was dry again, I made a loin cloth of the towel and padded into the kitchenette for a drink.

One shot out of the flat bottle called for two. I was thinking about having a third when the phone rang. I padded back into the living room to answer it.

"Dillon?" a voice asked. I grunted and thought about the voice, trying to place it. I didn't sound anything like my gunman friend or the figure who had driven Costain to the empty lot on Santa Monica. This voice had a nasal twang to it.

"Missing any guns?" it asked.

"Yeah," I said. "One. You have it, huh?"

"You bet. It's been fired, too."

"Uh-huh. Now tell me Harvey Co-

stain was killed with it some time tonight."

"You guessed it, wise guy. The cops'll be looking for it. All you got to do is forget you ever heard of Costain. Keep away from his girl friend, too. That way you got nothing to worry about."

"Suppose I talk in my sleep some night?"

"The cops get the gun, sucker. So long."

There was a dry faraway click on the line. I listened to wire hum for several seconds before recradling the phone. The hands of the electric clock on the radio table pointed almost to 3 A.M.

A wave of giddiness passed over me. I cackled out loud. To hell with the hard boys. To hell with Harvey Costain. To hell with the cops. Two drinks and I was higher than the birds that fly. I was big and hard and tough and hadn't a worry in the world. Nothing solid had gone into my stomach for almost fifteen hours. I decided to look in the refrigerator.

I looked. The refrigerator held five eggs. That was all. The breadbox was empty. I broke the eggs into a tall glass. Then I emptied what whiskey was left in the flat bottle, almost half a pint, on top of the eggs. I stirred the mixture in the glass with a kitchen knife, turned out the lights and took the glass into the bedroom. I sat on the edge of the bed with it and guzzled until it was empty. I reached for a cigarette, thought about lighting it.

SUNLIGHT smacked my eyes, when I opened them, and all but petrified my eyeballs. I was flat on my back, crosswise on the bed, with an empty egg-smeared glass in one hand and an unlighted cigarette in the other. The night lamp beside the bed was still on. The bedroom windows were closed but the shades were up. My mouth felt as if it was full of dry moldy cotton.

I sat up. My brain came loose from the back of my head and rolled forward and bounced against the inside of my forehead. When the throbbing died down a little, I set the egg glass on the night table under the lamp and reached a match and lit the cigarette. It tasted like old socks burning in my mouth. By sheer will power and cautious footwork I made it into the bathroom.

Another long hot shower followed by a quick cold one put enough strength in my arms to lift a safety razor. I shaved and dressed and drove down to the boulevard for a lumberjack's breakfast in a place near the building my office is in. After that I bought a newspaper and went up to the office to read it.

Harvey Costain's murder was on page one. His body had been found about four o'clock in the morning when a patrol car squad stopped to investigate a parked car in an empty lot out on west Santa Monica Boulevard. A slug from a thirty-eight automatic had been extracted from his left lung. The gun from which the slug had been fired had not been found.

Costain's movements, up until about seven o'clock of the previous evening but not after, had been traced. His whereabouts for the next nine hours seemed to be something of a mystery.

He had left his offices in the Los Angeles Counselors' Building on Hill Street near Fifth at three in the afternoon. According to his Filipino houseboy, he had reached his home in Brentwood Heights about four, dressed for the evening and had gone out again. Later he had been seen drinking alone at the bar of the Club Borracha on the Sunset Strip. Witnesses, names withheld, thought that he seemed slightly intoxicated and a bit surly when he left the Club Borracha around seven.

That seemed to be about all that the police knew at the moment—or were dishing out. There was no mention of Gail Tremaine anywhere in the story. It included a few other names, however, and told something about Costain's past personal history. I chewed over the names. Some I knew and some I didn't. They fell into three categories. Crook names. Rich names. Movie names. So far as I could tell, Costain had gotten them all off with verdicts of not guilty.

The last of these trials was almost two years old. I skimmed rapidly through the stuff about his early life. Among the details were the facts that he was a Harvard man and a bachelor.

I folded the newspaper and dropped it into the wastebasket. I had a short quick drink out of the office bottle, to take the knots out of my neck, and lit a cigarette and settled down to do some serious thinking. At the end of an hour, I gave that up as a bad job, strapped on my spare gun—a thirty-eight automatic and mate to the one I was missing—and left the office.

The desk nurse at the emergency hospital was a hatchet-faced old battle axe who told me that she was only on duty days and knew nothing about anyone named Miss Gail Tremaine. Furthermore, I was holding up a stretcher case that was just then coming along the corridor. I slunk out of there with my hat in my hand.

It was a nice day, if you happen to care for cool bright sunny days, and the hills above Hollywood had that clear green look that comes after a heavy rain. A mud-spattered taxicab was parked in front of a cab zone sign, just beyond the ambulance driveway. Its driver snoozed peacefully behind its wheel.

I opened the rear door of the cab, shut it, then leaned against the outside of the front door on the passenger's side. The window was down.

The cabby snorted, shook himself awake, swiveled his head to look at the back seat, eyed me suspiciously. "Take you somewhere, bud?" he asked, gruffly.

"That depends," I said. "I got a phone call from a friend that she was in a slight accident and was here in the emergency hospital. I got delayed on the way over. Now it seems she has already been discharged."

"A sad story, bud," he said, not impolitely. "I feel for you."

"She didn't have her own car. I was thinking, she might have left in a cab."

He yawned enormously and massaged his right shoulder with the thick dirty-nailed fingers of his left hand. He didn't say anything. I dug out my billfold and extracted a five dollar bill and tucked the billfold away again. He looked at the bill and his eyes brightened.

"Could you change this?" I asked.

The brightness faded from his eyes. After a long moment, he fished some bills out of the pocket of his leather jacket, handed me five ones for the five, put his money away again. I fanned the ones out and held them like a poker hand.

"How long have you been at this stand?" I asked.

"Ever since I got out of the Army," he said, in a flat voice. "When I learn to quit driving this tub like a tank, they're gonna gimme a better one."

"I mean today, this shift," I said evenly.

"Since six A.M. That'll be a buck."

"Not so fast. You the only cab here?"

"Only one regular. I made a dozen trips between six and eight. That's when they discharge the drunks and wild party champs. Describe your friend."

"Dark hair, slender, light-colored dress."

"Would you call her a looker?"

I nodded and dropped one of the bills on the cab seat. He looked at it without touching it, grimaced, as if remembering anything for longer than five minutes gave him a headache. I dropped another bill.

"Was she wearing a kind of fur jacket? Looked like it had been washed in a mud hole and not ironed afterwards?"

"That might be," I said, shortly. "I told you she was in an accident last night, or early this morning."

"O.K., bud, don't get sore. Most of the business I get here looks kind of bunged up. I just wanna be sure I had the right party." He covered the bills with his hand. "She gimme a Yucca Street address, the Villa Morocco Apartments, near Wilcox. About six-fifteen I'd say that was, just after I come on the job."

"Thanks," I said, and turned abruptly and walked back along the street to my car.

CHAPTER THREE

Policemen Are Funny

THE Villa Morocco was one of those Monterey type buildings with a cool green private jungle in the inner court. All of the apartments opened on the court and there was a dark wood balcony jutting out from white stucco walls for the upstairs tenants. In the heart of the jungle, water gurgled pleasantly in a tile-trimmed fountain.

It had a small intimate lobby off the entrance tunnel with a bare tessellated floor, rough antiqued plaster walls, majolica sand jars here and there and potted palms for the tourist trade. Heavy wormy-walnut chairs and settees gave it that final touch.

A pale-eyed desk clerk with a mascara darkened mustache patted at his breast pocket handkerchief rather self-consciously and said: "Your name, please, and whom did you wish to see?"

"Miss Gail Tremaine is *whom*," I said. "Tell her it's her cousin."

He almost looked at me then. He said: "I'll see if she is in, if you'd care to be seated."

"What's being seated got to do with it?" I asked him.

His small rosebud of a mouth twitched. He grabbed out the pocket handkerchief, coughed into it, very delicately, tore his eyes off my necktie, stared intently at my hat, as if trying desperately to recall what it was he had to do.

"You could give me her apartment number," I suggested. "I could find it by myself—and kind of surprise her."

"Oh, no," he breathed, in a shocked voice. "That would not do at all. No one is allowed unannounced in here. After all, the guests pay for privacy."

"And time for any strays to slip down the back stairs," I grinned, archly. "That's O.K., chum, but hurry it up."

"I'm afraid I must have your name," he insisted coldly.

"She might not recognize it," I said. "It's been a long time."

If he touched any kind of a buzzer button, it was with his foot, because I didn't see him move. A paneled door to the left of the PBX switchboard opened. The man who lounged out of the room behind the door had thick black eyebrows and a broad flat nose in the middle of a face that was as round as, and battered copper kettle. He weighed around two-fifty, with most of the weight at his belt line, and wore dark clothes. Dark blue suit, dark brown shirt, dark necktie. He didn't look at me. "The dame in fourteen-B snuck her pooch in again," he said to the desk-man.

"Heavens," the clerk groaned. "Not again."

"Yeah. So I warned her for the last time. So she slipped me ten. So I give her a couple of hours to feed it and take it back to the farm. That's five I owe you."

"I hate to break up all this high finance," I said.

The big moonfaced man swiveled his head and fixed me with the old hypnotic eye. "How's that again?" he asked.

"I'm here to see Miss Tremaine."

"Is that so? And your name is . . .?"

"Tremaine, same as hers. Cousin."

"Well, well, step right into my office."

He swung open a gate at the end of the desk. The clerk rested both elbows on the desk top and stared at one of the potted palms—stared past it out a window at two tall pale men wearing berets and talking together across the street. I edged through the gate and followed the big man into his office. He closed the door, softly, waved me into a chair.

"Keever's the name," he said. "I'm houseman here. I take kind of a special interest in Miss Tremaine. Any friend of hers is a friend of mine."

"Nice of you. How about telling her that I'm here."

"Yeah, sure. Right away. Cigar while waiting?"

"No thanks." I got out a pack of cigarettes, tucked one between my lips. He made a magician's pass in the air and held a match flame three inches from my nose. I drew a light from it, settled back, exhaled. He shook out the match

and parked his broad fanny against the edge of his desk. His eyes stared calmly down into my eyes. He made no move toward the house phone behind him. After a long moment I grinned stiffly at him.

"O.K.," I said. "How much to let me speak a few words with Gail Tremaine?"

He grinned back at me, not pleasantly. "Your name ain't Tremaine," he said. "I know a gumshoe when I see one. Been one myself for twenty-five years. Private?"

I dug out a card, one of my own this time, and passed it over to him.

"Yeah," he grunted. He gave the card the careful eye and tucked it away in a fold of a soft dark breast pocket wallet. "John A. Dillon, huh? What's the grift?"

"A client of mine thinks the Tremaine girl has her hooks into friend husband. I don't think so myself, but I'd like to have a talk with her. Then I can go back and tell this old harpy of a client that she is nuts. Diplomatically, of course. She's got plenty of dough and she's not tight with it."

"Just what kind of expenses are you getting?"

"You probably wouldn't believe it if I told you."

"Sounds like a set-up. C-note break you?"

"Take it easy. I haven't put in a bill, yet."

"You sound like a pushover. No retainer?"

"Oh, sure," I said, airily. "A small one. But with this dame it's better to wait and sock her all at once. Don't worry, I know what I'm doing."

He stared at me for a moment longer. A thought flickered in his eyes, but I couldn't read it. Finally, he uncrossed his ankles and went around the desk and sat down behind it. He took the time to trim a cigar and light it. A smell of heavy-scented flowers drifted in through an open window behind him. The window looked out upon the center court.

I said: "How about a ten spot now and the rest on the cuff?"

HE SMILED an oily smile behind a thick cloud of cigar smoke. I took out my billfold and slid a ten dollar bill across the desk. He palmed it.

"Read the morning papers?" he asked, in a too casual voice. My pulse dropped so low that I felt numb all over. I didn't answer him. I dragged deeply on the cigarette, exhaled, gave him the puzzled eye. "A dilly of a murder last night," he said.

"Do tell." I didn't quite bleat. "Who got it?"

"A big shot. Harvey Costain, the racketeers' mouthpiece. The heat's on, this time. He's been connected with a lot of fast dough, these last years. Somebody slipped him a lead button at last."

"That's terrible." I managed the proper grimace without having my face crack wide open and fall off. "As one of the boys, I'd like to hear the details. Talk shop and all that. Right now, though, I'm in a bit of a hurry. Let's announce me to Miss Tremaine, huh?"

"Relax. It's only eleven-thirty. She don't never get up until noon. Give her a chance to get coffee. She's more apt to talk civil to you."

"You seem to know a lot about her habits."

"She's been a tenant here ten months now."

That didn't sound like anything that I could use. I let it ride. He leaned back in his padded desk chair and blew a soft blue doughnut of smoke at the ceiling. A tired blow-fly buzzed in at the window and buzzed slowly around the room, as if searching for a dirty corner in which to drop its eggs. The dirty corner was there, but the fly didn't see it and got discouraged and buzzed out again.

"She was his girl friend, kind of," Keever said suddenly. He lowered his eyes and gave me a bright, almost pleased, look of expectancy. I did what I could to look jarred. The stub of my cigarette dangled between my lips. Smoke curled upward past my eyes. I squinted through it and said: "Aw, hell, you're kidding."

He shook his head from side to side, slowly, smiled his oily smile again, looked openly pleased. "Why would I kid about a thing like that?" he growled. "The rumor's around he footed her bills —paid the rent. Naturally he would give her the money and let her pay it herself. He wouldn't do nothing so foolish as to write us out one of his own checks. So it's only a rumor—and I don't believe it myself. Not about a lovely girl like Miss Tremaine."

The hell you don't, I thought, batting his gaze back at him for no score. "He ever visit her here?" I asked. "Or wouldn't you know that?"

"Nothing ever happens around here that I don't know," he assured me, in a firm comfortable tone of voice. "Yeah, he come here. He was here last night. Around seven-thirty, that was. Like the papers say, he looked a little pie-eyed, even then. They went out, him and the girl, around fifteen minutes later. She comes in around six-thirty this morning —alone. Leaves a lot to the imagination, don't it?"

"Yeah," I grunted. "Like the lady and the tiger."

"Huh?" He eyed me quizzically. "How's that again?"

"Skip it," I said. "So you are sitting on all of his and not telling any of it to the coppers, huh?"

"Aw, hell, what have I got they don't already know? I mean, what have I *really* got? I ain't the kind of a guy to get nobody in no trouble—especially a lovely girl like Miss Tremaine."

We sat there, sparring with our eyes, half smiling, like a couple of gamblers with five aces apiece. I called him.

"You haven't talked to the cops yet," I said. "It's kind of late to talk now, without getting your nose pinched some. That probably means you aren't ever going to—because you see a little profit for your silence somewhere."

"It's already coming in," he chuckled, and tucked my ten spot away in the soft dark wallet. He slipped the wallet back inside his coat, said. "Now tell me what you *really* came to see her about. Remember, I ~~been~~ around for a long time."

"So have I," I snapped. "I told you what I wanted to see her about—as much of the story as I decently could. I thought you were a man to be trusted."

"Oh, I am, son, I am. Relax." He reached out lazily and lifted the house phone, rumbled into it, then covered the mouthpiece with his hand. "Hope I don't wake her up. A—"

"Lovely girl like that," I finished for him.

He nodded, but he wasn't looking at me. His eyes dreamed at a spot on the wall above my head. They focused suddenly. He took the cigar out of his face and smirked into the phone.

"Keever, the houseman, Miss Tremaine . . . Yeah, Keever. You have a visitor in the lobby, a gentleman . . . Yeah, he looks O.K. to me. Won't say what he wants. He ain't a sheriff or bill collector or nothing like that . . . Huh? I was just kidding, Miss Tremaine . . . Sure, I think you ought to see him. He's maybe just an autograph hound or something. I'll stick close to this phone, if you need me . . . O.K., thanks a lot, Miss Tremaine. Send him right up."

He recradled the phone and gave me the nod. "Twelve-A, upstairs. She sounded kind of worried at that. Maybe she's read the papers. Treat her gentle. I'll be watching to see you come back this way."

"Maybe you feel you ought to come along and sit on her other knee?"

"Naw. What's between her and you is between you and her. You seem O.K."

I ground out my cigarette stub in an ashtray, stood up. He watched me out the door and I could feel his eyes on the back of my neck as I threaded my way through the cool green private jungle in the court, and up the open stairway to the balcony.

Twelve-A was a corner apartment at the rear of the building. I pressed the nacre button beside the door. Muffled chimes rang softly, distantly. I waited.

In a minute or so the door opened. I looked down at a starched white maid's cap perched in dead center on top of glistening straight black hair. A pair of

apprehensive oriental eyes in a delicately boned face peered up at me.

I grinned reassuringly. "Alla samee Missy Tremaine, him home?"

"Come in, please," the maid said, in a voice like a torch singer's. I grabbed off my hat and tottered past her onto a pale aqua rug that was not quite as thick and soft as a down mattress. The door whispered shut.

"May I inform Miss Tremaine who is calling, please?"

"Johnny Dillon," I blurted, stuffing my hat in my pocket.

"Thank you." Her short black skirt swished away and her spiked heels flashed and disappeared. I clipped myself on the side of the chin with my left fist and pawed the room with my eyes.

It had a lot of pickled walnut furniture with pale aqua cushions, a few dark sticks here and there to make company for the grand piano which looked like polished black diamond, and was probably nothing but ebony shined up a little. An entire wall around a black tile fireplace was mirror-paneled. Brass fire tools and a brass screen sparkled on the hearth. Pieces of nutty sculpture in light and dark woods populated the odd corners of the room. There were books in built-in shelves.

GOLD lamé lounging pajamas made her look even slimmer and taller than I remembered her. She was in the room before I noticed her, and then the fragrance of her perfume hit me and I jerked my head around and stared.

"Yes?" Her voice startled me. I realized that I had not heard it before that moment. It was a soft, low, almost throaty voice, rather impersonal, like a time operator telling you the time. There was no sign of recognition in her eyes. I smiled a huge warm friendly smile.

"Dillon's the name," I gushed. "Remember me? The guy who drove you to the hospital last night?"

"A man named Steele took me there," she answered coolly.

"Oh, that," I murmured deprecatingly. "Just a name I used."

"I see. And I suppose you have your reasons for giving a false name?"

"Uh-huh." My smile stiffened, sickened, struggled a little and died. "Let's sit down," I mumbled. "I've had a touch of gout. My foot is killing me."

She shrugged coldly, dropped languorously into one of the soft aqua chairs beside a pickled walnut table. Long gold legs glittered as she crossed them. She reached a cigarette off the end table. I fumbled up a light for her and then sat down on the piano bench and shakily lit one of my own cigarettes. A long deep drag of smoke steadied my nerves some. I decided that it was time to take the ball away from her.

"How well do you know Keever?" she asked.

"Keever?" I coughed out the cloud of smoke.

"Yes, Keever, That man downstairs."

"Well, you know how it is with guys in the same racket."

"So you are some sort of detective. I rather suspected it."

"Uh-huh. Private. Keever seems to think a lot of you."

"He's a slimy wolf—or would be if he could. I wouldn't trust him to walk my dog, if I had a dog."

"How about me? Would it be all right if I aired the little fellow now and then, if and when you ever do get him?"

"Let's talk about why you are here," she said curtly. "What do you want?"

"Oh, nothing much," I told her. "Hardly anything at all. It was such a fine morning, after all that rain yesterday, that I thought I would just scamper over for a chat before the police got around to you."

"Indeed? And why should the police be getting around to me?"

"Well, policemen are funny. Er—I guess you trust your maid."

"Implicitly. She's gone to market for things for luncheon."

"Such is faith. You trust her implicitly, but you suspected that I was some kind of a detective, so you sent her out. Who killed Harvey Costain?"

I made my voice hard and sharp and leered directly at her. It was her turn to

swallow her cigarette and cough herself purple and fall on the floor and gasp out a full confession. She smiled for the first time that day, faintly, coolly, almost bleakly, but she smiled.

"Policemen *are* funny," she drawled. "Funny, fast and very very tricky. That goes for the private variety, too." Bitterness hardened her voice. "Lord, how I despise cops. All cops."

"What did a cop ever do to you?" I grumbled.

"None of your business," she snapped, lurching up out of the chair and standing stiff-legged in the middle of the thick soft aqua rug. "You're wasting my time, baby, if that's all you have to say. You'd better beat it."

"Not quite," I said, grimly. "Have the cops been here?"

"No," she said huskily. "I hope I never see another cop as long as I live. Get going, baby."

I stood up. Her big, dark eyes had lost some of their softness, but not all of it. The gold pajama cloth clung to her curves like heavy silk. Her lips parted and her breathing became a harsh dry sound.

"You'll be seeing them, just the same," I said.

"Quit hedging, baby. Is it money you are after?"

"Damn your money," I snarled, pitching my cigarette into the fireplace. "I'm the guy who beefed to Harvey Costain when he knocked you down last night, out at the Blue Valley Inn bar. Tell me you don't remember that."

"Yes, I do remember," she whispered, huskily.

"Well, that's something at last."

"They wouldn't let you touch him."

"Yeah. He was one of their juiciest suckers. They liked his dough. So they sapped me. To hell with them. To hell with him. That's probably where he is. He's dead—murdered. We both know that. I found you, soaked to the skin, outside in the parking lot, staring into his car. He was in there with a bullet in him even then. Who shot him? You?"

She began to tremble. "No," she breathed. "I didn't kill him." Her eyes got larger, darker. They became deep black pools of emotion. The emotion was fear.

I TOOK a quick long step, grabbed her. She quit shaking. Her body went rigid. Her perfume lapped at my brain, like a stormy surf eating away a soft sandy beach. I kissed her on the mouth, hard. She didn't fight me or resist. She just stood there, unyielding, as stiff and motionless as a fence post. I let go of her and saw something new in her eyes. The fear had died down a little and there were flecks of anger in them.

"Funny, fast, tricky and common," she said.

"Who killed Harvey Costain?" I asked huskily.

"I don't know who killed him," she answered.

"I'd like to believe that," I said. "I really would."

"It's true," she said, and the brittleness went out of her voice. "After they carried you out of the bar, Harvey wanted to go. I stopped in the powder room. He went to get the car. Later, I waited outside on the porch. After a very long time, I was afraid he might have passed out, so I went out to the car myself—found him like that. Then, I don't know how soon, someone came—you, I suppose—and then I was there in the hospital. That's every bit of it."

"Not quite," I said, in a thick strained voice. "He was shot with my gun."

She gave me a long look that made me want to pick up the big black piano and throw it into the next apartment, and sat down in the deep aqua chair.

"The gun was in my car, right next to his," I said, still thickly. "I didn't miss it until later. Too much later. The killer swiped it, used it, and afterwards phoned me at my place to tell me to keep my face shut or the gun would go to the police as evidence against me."

Something thudded, somewhere in the apartment. This was followed by the sound of paper crackling and something rolling across kitchen linoleum. High heels beat a quick, brief tattoo on the

same linoleum and the rolling sound stopped.

"Mina's back." Gail Tremaine whispered. I nodded. Sunlight poked through a tree branch near the balcony and shafted through the window to make moving patterns on the aqua rug. I dug out another cigarette, lit it.

"What was Harvey Costain to you?" I asked.

"A friend. A very good friend, once. After that he changed. He began to act as if he owned me."

"Did he?"

"Did he what?"

"Own you."

"No." Anger stiffened her and glittered in her eyes again.

"A joint like this doesn't go for peanuts" I growled.

"Singing for Lew Gannon at the Club Borracha doesn't exactly pay me peanuts either, baby," she snapped. "I think you'd better leave now."

I might have jumped a little because she said: "I suppose you thought the lady lived friendless and alone. An easy touch. Well. I have friends who can be as tough as they have to be. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

"Pipes bite my tongue," I said lamely. "I like them, but they don't like me. How did Mina get to market and back so invisibly?

"There's a back stairs," she sneered. "So it's going to put its tail between its legs and sneak home. You fooled me, baby. Those shoulders make you look almost manly."

"They fool a lot of people." I said. "I wasn't thinking about your friends. It's Keever. I'd like to give him something to worry over. You'd better watch your step with him, too. He may be a slimy wolf, but he's nobody's fool. See you later."

I managed to work up a grin of sorts for her and left her sitting there, big-eyed and wondering, and pushed through a door into a narrow windowless dark serving pantry. The little Jap maid had a starched white apron on and was slicing cucumbers at a gleaming tiled sink.

"Hi, what's for lunch?" I asked her.

She didn't answer me.

"Nice day, isn't it?" I drawled.

"Yes, it is," she said, without looking up.

"Where's the secret panel to the back stairs?"

"That door leads to them." She looked at the door.

"I must be slipping," I said, and let myself out. I closed the door, softly, and jogged down open wooden steps to a wide concrete alley. At the end of the alley, I halted to look along the street to where my car was parked. I didn't see Keever anywhere, so I went along to the car and got in and drove away from there.

CHAPTER FOUR

Too Bad for Dillon

OUT on the Strip, that piece of Sunset Boulevard which is in the County and not subject to city ordinances, the coolness and lack of moisture in the air made it possible to see far out across the flats of West Los Angeles and Beverly Hills, almost to the ocean.

I paid a dollar and three cents for coffee and a hamburger at a drive-in restaurant and left my car there and strolled westward past agency doors looking like foreign embassies, night clubs closed until evening, antique shops where they seat you before mentioning prices and tanned young men sitting under striped sidewalk umbrellas, waiting to guide you past movie stars' palaces for a fee, in your car.

A black cocker spaniel watched me enter the street bar of the Club Borracha. His leash was tied to the leg of a bar stool. A downy old party in soft gray flannels sat on top of the stool guzzling a martini. He had the glass tilted high, when I came in, and was going after the olive. I didn't see any bartender and Gray Flannels seemed to be the only customer in the place.

I parked myself at the end of the bar with my back to the end wall and pulled my hat low over my face and glared

around from under the brim. The dog picked up its ears, tilted its head a little to one side. I wrinkled my nose and bared my teeth at it. This earned me a low growl.

Gray Flannels jerked his nose out of his glass, frowned down at the dog, then scowled along the bar at me. "I say, *must* you annoy my dog?" His voice sounded as if the olive had gotten stuck in his throat.

I kept right on glaring at the dog from under my hat brim and didn't answer him. The dog growled softly again.

"I say, *must* you?" The voice jumped an octave.

A short, sad-faced barman slid out of a door at the far end of the bar and glided toward us. He put both hands on the inner edge of the bar in front of Gray Flannels and said: "Something wrong, sir?"

"This person deliberately insulted Genghis Khan," the man complained.

"Pardon me," I said, nastily. "I just didn't recognize the disguise."

The barman swiveled his head around, slowly, almost mechanically, as if a vertical pivot rod held it to his shoulders and a little motor moved it. While he stared at me, his left hand fumbled under the bar. Then he just stood there, with both arms hanging slack at his sides. and watched me.

"You can't bring a pet into a food or drink place in this town," I drawled. "The penalties are awful ghastly."

Gray Flannels whitened under his tan. He raked out a bill, threw it on the bar, yanked the leash loose from the bar stool. He didn't quite leap out the street door. I could almost feel the floor burns on the dog's paws and felt badly about that.

"Why?" the barman asked, in a bleak tone. "Why did you have to go and say that?"

"Didn't you ever hear of the Board of Health?" I growled. "Read the rules."

"What about the Board of Health?" a new voice asked, from behind me. It was a silky, almost whispering voice. I turned and gave it the tough eye and it tough-eyed me right back.

He was a natty little man in a smartly cut beige gabardine suit, about five-six in height and as lean as a jockey. He had black curly hair above a high forehead, a small, flat nose and a cleft in his chin. A cigarette dangled from one corner of his narrow thin-lipped mouth, lisping smoke, and horizontal wrinkles creased his forehead, as if my answer meant life or death to him, or the smoke bothered his eyes.

"Fine body of men," I said. "Do a lot of good work."

"Yeah?" The cigarette bobbled up and down. "So what?"

"So this joint's had all the bad noise it can stand."

Smoke fumed downward from his nostrils as he dropped the cigarette and stepped on it, finding it with the sole of his shoe without looking down and pressing it out. The barman sidled closer, watching me and mopping absently with his cloth on a bar-top that was as spotless as a dutch doorstep.

"I don't follow you, friend," the natty little man purred.

His voice didn't have any sort of a nasal twang to it, but a voice on a phone can be disguised, so I said: "Who followed Harvey Costain when he left here last night?"

The barman's aimless rubbing ceased abruptly and he leaned against the inner edge of the bar, not moving at all. The natty little man smiled slowly, almost sleepily, shrugged. "I wouldn't know. All I know is what I read in the papers, as the saying is."

"According to those same papers, this is where he was last seen."

He shrugged again. "Make your point, friend."

"Not here," I said. "Too public. And not to you, unless your name is Lew Gannon."

"I'm Eddie Crum," he said, still smiling. "Let's go up to the office."

He turned on his heel. I slid off the bar stool. The barman's hand began to circle absently again, around and around on the shiny bar-top. Crum held open a door in the side wall and let me go past him. The door closed soundlessly, as if

cushioned by air, and we went up thickly carpeted stairs and along a hushed hallway past wide, solid-looking oak doors with fancy bronze knobs, all closed at the moment, to one at the end marked "Private" in fine goldleaf lettering.

Crum knocked lightly, then stood there inspecting the small neat fingernails of his other hand. A mechanical lock buzzed and he reached the knob, opened the door and let me pass him again.

THE office was tastefully furnished and looked more like a deacon's study than a place of business. It had a small functional fireplace, books on shelves built into paneled walls, somber drapes pulled back from some northlight windows and a comfortably worn oriental rug on the floor, faded but expensive.

A bull-necked, dark-haired, gray-eyed man in a soft dark tweed suit sat in a high-backed leather chair behind a large walnut desk with nothing on it but three telephones and a bronze ashtray. He was scratching the side of his head, just above his right ear, with the point of a bronze letter opener. His face held no expression at all as he said: "Is this the bar call?"

"Yeah," Eddie Crum said. "This is it."

"What's your trouble?" the man asked me.

"No trouble," I said. "You're Gannon?"

He nodded, tapping the letter opener against his strong white teeth. Crum dropped into an armchair, threw a leg over one of the arms, idly swung his foot. I sat down where I could watch them both and tossed my wallet on the desk and lit a cigarette while Gannon looked at my operative's license.

"One of those," he said dryly, passing back the wallet. "What's the idea?"

"The idea is, Harvey Costain is my client," I lied blandly. "Was, up to last night, that is. In a way, he still is."

Nothing in his face changed. Crum put his head against the back of his chair and stared at the ceiling. Gannon drawled: "Anything to show to prove that?"

"I don't have to prove that," I snapped. "Not if I prove who murdered him."

He smiled then, bleakly and not with his eyes.

"How are you doing, so far?" he asked, mildly.

"All right, so far," I said stiffly. "I know about some trouble that he had last night, before he was bumped. Also about the trouble he had with you."

The bleak smile faded. I grinned, nastily, and blew a long cloud of smoke at him. Without lifting his head off the chair back, Eddie Crum looked down the sides of his nose at me.

"Something else," I said sharply. "It may come as a shock to you, but I had a spare gun all the time. I'm wearing it now. Nobody is going to get this one away from me, believe me."

"Trouble is like booze," Gannon said, almost softly. "A lot of people drink. Some can handle it. Others crack up."

"Alcoholism runs in my family," I sneered. "It killed my grandfather—at the age of a hundred and six."

"This guy's in a bad way, boss," Eddie Crum purred at the ceiling. "Maybe he's just thirsty. Maybe he needs a drink to straighten him out."

"Maybe I just need to get my other gun back," I rapped.

"O.K., you win," Gannon sighed.

That jarred me. I should have guessed what was coming, but I stiffened and just sat there and gaped while his hand dipped into a drawer of the desk and came up with a gun. It was not my gun. He pointed it at me, smiled bleakly again and said: "On your feet, peeper."

I stood up.

Crum got up and came over and frisked me smoothly and skidded my spare gun across the desk to his boss and went back and flopped in the big chair with his leg over the arm of it again. My cigarette was burning short and hot between my fingers. I had it by the very last shred of tobacco.

"Relax," Gannon said, pushing the bronze ashtray at me. He put both guns in the desk drawer, closed the drawer. I dropped the stub into the ash-

tray and sat down. "So you lost another gun somewhere," he mused.

I didn't say anything.

"What was your job with Costain?" he asked.

I didn't say anything.

"You never worked for him," he said then. "You screwballed your way in here and now you are bluffing. I knew a thing or two about Costain's business and who worked for him. I had him on a retainer basis myself. No matter what I thought about him personally, he was a smart attorney—and in my business, it pays to hire only the best."

"Maybe he kept just one or two teenie weenie secrets to himself," I drawled. "Like selling you out to Tony Zarsella."

For a long moment he sat there with his hands flat on the desk top and stared at me and didn't move a muscle. Eddie Crum rolled his eyes forward and looked down the sides of his nose again. Apart from that, he didn't move either.

I had a sudden feeling that someone was behind me. I strained my ears for the sound of movement and silence thickened the air in the room until it was almost a chore to breathe. I jerked my head around. Nobody there. Crum snickered. Gannon glanced at him, briefly and without meaning. I clawed out another cigarette.

"You are still bluffing," Gannon told me quietly.

"Like hell," I said. "The johns think Costain was murdered where they found him, down below here in an empty lot on Santa Monica. That's all crap."

"Costain was bumped out in the valley and moved later," he said. "He was knocked off in the rain in Tony Zarsella's parking lot. Is that what you mean?"

I nodded, and wondered why my neck didn't creak, the way it felt about then.

"I had the job done—just like that—to get rid of them both. Is that it?"

"That's close enough," I said stiffly. I groped out a matchbook, tore off a match. Gannon did a little tattoo on the desk top with the bronze letter opener. I lit the cigarette and said: "Rumor has it, Zarsella worked for you once."

"Years ago," he admitted.

"I gather he got fired. Maybe not. Either way, he's competition for you, now that he's got his own gambling set-up out in the valley. He must attract a lot of the folks he knew when he worked here."

EDDIE CRUM slid his leg off the chair arm and planted both feet on the carpet and looked at his boss. Gannon watched me.

"This town's full of competition," he said.

"There's competition and there's competition," I said. "Zarsella gave you one kind and Costain gave you another kind."

"How do you mean?" His voice seemed to tighten as he spoke.

"With a girl, is how I mean," I grunted.

"You're through, peeper," he snapped. "I know all about you—and your missing gun. I got a phone call from the girl, just before you got here, so I was expecting you. She told me all about last night—and about you bothering her this morning."

He stood the letter opener on its point on the shiny surface of the desk and leaned on it and almost drove it through the wood.

"I'll tell you this just once," he grated. "Forget the Harvey Costain case. It's police business, not yours. And stay away from Gail Tremaine. Get that? I mean way away. Show him out, Eddie."

Crum pushed himself up out of the chair. I sat still. One of the phones on the desk rang sharply, briefly. Gannon looked at it, but didn't touch it, or move.

I said: "I'd kind of like to have my gun back."

"The police are looking for an automatic thirty-eight," he said heavily. "This gun is a thirty-eight."

"Let's go, friend," Eddie Crum purred. The phone rang again. Gannon picked it up this time, and grunted into the mouthpiece. Crum touched my arm. I got up and followed him to the door.

When I looked back, Gannon was doodling with the letter opener and

listening and not talking. He didn't look up at me. I stepped into the hallway and Crum followed me and the door clicked shut. We went along past the heavy oak doors to the stairs, down them.

In the bar lounge, by the street door, Eddie Crum said: "I know how you feel, friend. She works here. I see her every night."

"You will get your face shot off," I told him.

"Hell, I mean that I see her around, at work."

"You will get your face shot off," I growled.

"I know my business," he purred, grinning. "So long."

The sad-faced barman had three customers, a long-jawed guy with teeth like a horse and two giggling dames, years too old for their clothes. One of the dames hiccoughed and then belched loudly. Her friends almost fell off their stools laughing, so she did it again. The barman looked disgusted.

"So long," I said, and left.

At the drive-in restaurant, I had more coffee and then got my car and drove back to the office.

An hour of staring at the wall above my desk fed me up. There hadn't been any mail when I got back, around mid-afternoon, no messages under the door, and nobody called me up.

I found an old pipe and blew the dust out of it and filled it up with tobacco, just for the hell of it. I sat there and smoked until my tongue got as raw as an open wound packed with salt and laid the pipe away. After that, I just sat there.

The traffic signal down on the corner whirred and clinked with monotonous regularity. A leather-lunged news vendor with rusted steel vocal chords bawled faintly in the distance, making the same noises over and over again. Traffic growled both ways along the boulevard. And nobody called me up.

Finally, I tapped the office bottle, with discretion, shut the windows, set the spring lock and let the door slam shut after me.

The afternoon sheets had more about Costain than the earlier editions, but they followed the usual pattern. They hinted, without naming names, that some prominent film folk with shady pasts and underworld connections might soon be dragged into the case. The police hinted, without naming names, that they already had a dozen suspects rounded up for questioning and the confessions would be rolling in before sundown. That would be in about two and a half hours, according to my strapwatch.

I re-read the story when I got up to the apartment and had my hat and shoes off and was sitting in a chair by the radio. I didn't see my name anywhere, nor Gail Tremaine's. There was still nothing about Tony Zarsella's valley joint, and only a repeat on the previous mention of the Club Borracha—Costain had been seen there, around seven in the evening, but had left.

Knuckles hit the hall door, lightly. I crawled down off the ceiling after a while and stood flatfooted in the middle of the room. I was fresh out of guns. A key tickled the lock, the door opened. A tired looking maid with straggly gray hair poked her face in and said: "Oh, excuse me. I'll come back." She shut the door before I could open my mouth. Then the telephone rang.

I crossed the room to answer it.

"Dillon?" a voice asked. The voice with the nasal twang.

"All right," I snarled. "Who's bunions did I tramp on now?"

"Your own, sucker," the voice twanged. "Too bad for you."

"That's not what your boss told me just now," I growled.

"Huh?" This startled explosion of breath didn't seem to make the voice sound any different, or give me any new ideas about it. "Think you're smart, huh? O.K., wise guy. Now the cops get the gun."

"Can't we talk this over," I asked. "Can't I meet you somewhere?"

"Break it up," the voice sneered. "You were warned what would happen if you got too nosey. So you got too nosey. So now the cops get the kill gun. Your gun."

"Oh, hell, I already told them about that," I yelled, and hung up.

I was in the bedroom stuffing what I thought I might need on a short trip into a traveling bag when the phone rang again. I let it ring several times and then lunged into the living room and grabbed it.

"Central Homicide," I said, in a gruff tone.

"Ha-ha-ha," a voice laughed—the same voice.

"Ha-ha, yourself," I grated, and hung up again.

It let go almost immediately and kept on ringing. I got into my shoes and finished packing in nothing flat and got out of the apartment. As I prowled down the hall toward the elevator, the distant, muffled, insistent peal followed me. The closing elevator doors stopped that. I punched a down button.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Face on Page One

A MAN with a tired sour expression turned the hotel register around and pushed a pen at me. I wrote a phony name and address and pushed a five dollar bill across the desk. He gave me fifty cents in change and slapped a desk bell.

Two crusty old codgers were deep in a checker game at a table against one wall of the narrow lobby. The desk bell woke them up. One of them looked at me in an annoyed way and made a move.

A pimply, hungry-eyed kid in a hop uniform two sizes too small for him minced out of the men's room and picked up my bag. The deskman tossed a tabbed key at him. He speared it and stepped into a two-by-four elevator cage ahead of me.

We got off on five, the top floor, and went along a dim, narrow hallway with worn linoleum and smelling of hidden food and cheap disinfectant. The hop keyed his way into the last room at the back and switched on a light.

The room had a bed, a chair and a dresser and not much else. There was more worn linoleum, a brown and yellow checked pattern, on the floor. The bed frame was iron painted white. The chair and the dresser looked as if they might have been white at one time. A single window, closed at the moment, looked on the gray waste of an air shaft. On the wall above the bed was the picture of an Indian sitting on a horse. The horse looked all fagged out and the Indian was dying on the horse's neck, as if the air in the room had gotten them both.

The hop dropped my bag and hung in the door-frame, staring at me. "Anything else, mister?" he asked, in a tight, foxy voice.

"You could open a window," I said. "Or isn't that allowed?"

He looked as if he had been stabbed in the back by a trusted friend as he dragged his feet to the window and heaved it up. Garbled voices and the clatter of dishes and a burned grease smell wafted into the room from the air shaft. I put the four-bit piece into his thin hand.

"How old are you?" I asked him.

His eyes narrowed. His mouth twitched. I fished out a ten dollar bill and folded it over twice and poked it into the breast pocket of his jacket. "That'll buy me two bottles of liquor, if they'll sell it to you," I said.

"One, if I buy it for you," he said.

"One, then, with ice and some soda."

He grinned a tight, pimply-faced grin at me and went out. I locked the door and hung my hat and coat on the chair and switched out the light. For the next quarter hour, I smoked and lay on the bed and listened to the clatter in the air shaft. Noises came and went. A radio blared for a while and was cut off. Snores drifted across the shaft. The drone of a vacuum cleaner floated up from below. A dish crashed and a woman's voice swore hoarsely. The snoring ceased abruptly but the cleaner whined on. I got up and tamped out my cigarette in an ashtray on the dresser and lay down again.

A fist thumped the door. I got up and

unlocked it. Keever, the Villa Morocco house dick, lumbered into the room. I closed the door, leaned my back against it and watched him peer around.

"Cozy," he said. "You are, that is."

I didn't answer him, or move.

"Conscience bothering you, son?" he asked.

He gave the room's lone chair a brief doubtful glance and decided to sit on the edge of the bed. The bedsprings agonized under his bulk, but nothing let go. Thin knuckles tickled the door. I opened it, about six inches. The pimply-faced bellhop held up a paper bag with two bottles in it.

"Couldn't get no ice," he said, sulkily. I reached for the bag, looked at the bottles, one whiskey, one soda.

"Old Plaster, huh?" I grunted. "I ought to send this back and buy some radiator fluid instead."

"It was the best they had, best I could get."

"I'll bet." I reached out and gathered the front of his uniform coat and pulled him close to the door. "That'll be about nine bucks in change I've got coming, huh?"

"Seven bucks," he wheezed. "Two-fifty for the booze. Four bits for fizz."

"All right, you young bandit," I snapped. "Hand it over."

"I ain't got it," he whined. "Lemme go. I'll yell."

"Yell, and I'll throttle you. Where's the dough?"

"Down in the locker room, in my regular clothes."

"Get it," I rapped. "Bring it up or I'll be down."

I let go of him and slammed the door in his face.

"Mean bugger, ain't you?" Keever chuckled. "A buck says you never see your seven again. I know these kids in joints like this."

"Uh-huh. I wish I didn't," I said wearily. "Drink?"

"Don't mind if I do," he said. "Neat's O.K. by me."

There was a water tumbler on the dresser. I dusted it out and looked around for a good sharp edge to open the soda bottle on. Keever pulled a heavy key ring out of his pants. You could have burgled any house with the flat metal gadgets it held besides the keys. I made some crack or other.

"Tools of the trade," he chuckled. "The gumshoe trade."

I HALF filled the tumbler with whiskey and gave it to him. Then I poured about half of the soda water out on the window sill and reloaded the bottle with whiskey.

"What's the matter?" Keever asked. "Can't you take it?"

"Not this crap. Here's how. What's on your mind?"

He polished off his drink in manly style. I nibbled a little of the mixture in the soda bottle. I was afraid to light a cigarette near it. Keever sat there holding the empty glass. Amusement shone in his eyes, but not the nice-clean-fun kind of amusement.

"I been kind of wondering what's on yours," he said. "I asked you, is the old conscience bothering you, son?"

"Not that it's any of your business," I said. "No, it isn't."

"Something is," he said dryly. "I dropped by your apartment, this afternoon, to see you. I figured it might be kind of interesting for you and me to chew over this Costain case and see if we couldn't figure out something that maybe we could toss to friends downtown."

"Providing either of us had any friends downtown."

"Yeah. Well, like I say, I stopped by your place—just in time to see you legging down the street with a suitcase. So I kind of tool along behind. I follow you out to the airport and see you leave your crate in the garage out there—just like you was going to New York, or Chicago, or someplace. But you don't take no plane. You get into a taxi and come right back to town and register under a wrong name in a flop like this. Wrong name registering is against the law, son."

He cocked a heavy eyebrow at me, grinned and reached the bottle off the

dresser and poured himself another shot. He downed the shot and put the bottle back and set the glass beside it.

"You know how to tail," I said. "I didn't see you."

"I ain't gumshoed twenty years for nothing," he smirked.

I took another pull at the soda bottle, just to be doing something while the big coppery-faced man trimmed a cigar. He got it smoldering, ruining the last bit of breathable air in the room.

"Looks to me like you want somebody to think you skipped town," he said. "After looking for a week or so and finding your crate at the airport, that is."

"That could be," I said.

"Cops want you?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Since you are one of of the boys, I'll tell you something. All in the strictest confidence, of course."

He sat there, screened by oily blue smoke, and didn't say anything. I said: "After I talked to the Tremaine girl this morning, I talked to this client that I told you about. Talked enough so's she's forgotten all about Gail Tremaine. But she still thinks friend husband is a heel, so I have to work a new angle for her. But I'm working alone—get that. No chiselers. Personally, I still think my client is nuts."

"Maybe she is," he said calmly. "I ain't. Not nuts enough to believe you are working for any such rich and mysterious client. What's my silence worth to you now?"

Somewhere, in one of the rooms off the air shaft, a fight started. A woman's voice argued with a man's voice. The words didn't mean anything. The bitterness behind them did. The woman's voice got shriller. The thud of a fist clipping a not so solid jaw stopped the fight.

"There's a guy," Keever chuckled. "He won't never get took."

"He's a wife beater," I sneered. "That doesn't help him any."

He worked his cigar across his mouth and stared up through his heavy black eyebrows at me. After a long moment, he grinned unpleasantly again and revolved a thumb around on the tips of two first fingers. I hauled out my wallet.

"Got a gun?" I asked, suddenly.

He looked surprised. "Yeah."

"I'll buy it off you," I said.

"For five C's," he said gruffly.

"Hell, I haven't got that much."

"How much you got?"

"Less than two hundred, and I have to eat."

"How much can you get?"

"I'll pay one C. That's final."

He thought that over and nodded. I slid five twenty dollar bills out of the wallet and put the wallet away and laid the money on the ratty bedspread. He reached for it. I snatched it away.

He chuckled, deep in his throat, and dug up the gun, a thirty-two special with the barrel sawed off just ahead of the cylinder, a belly gun. He snapped out the cylinder and shook the cartridges into his hand. He polished each cartridge with his handkerchief, very carefully, and let them fall out of the handkerchief onto the bed. Then he polished the gun and dropped it the same way. I gave him the money and picked up the gun and reloaded it.

"I might be planning to murder somebody with this," I said.

"Go ahead," he said. "It ain't registered to me. I took it off a mug, years ago."

"I could hold you up now and get my dough back."

He frowned, stood up, shook his head slowly. "Naw," he growled. "You ain't gonna do nothing like that. I gotta go now, son. One thing—lay off that kid. I may have some use for him."

"Better tag me from here yourself," I said. "I could lose that kid in a phone booth."

"That's an idea," he rumbled, almost smiling again. "Well, so long, son. See you in jail."

When he was gone, I nipped at the soda bottle and lit another cigarette. I sat on the bed for a long time, trying to think and, as usual, getting nowhere with it. What little daylight there had been in the air shaft disappeared completely. The rise and fall of voices, the radios, the smell of grease and badly

cooked foods, the fights, the snores, the whispers, the clatter and the characters wrestling silently, like me, all went on. I gave it up, finally, tucked the thirty-two into my belt, kicked my suitcases under the bed and went out to eat.

IT WAS the quiet time of evening, when dinners have not yet been finished, when only the floaters move in the streets like shadows, before the beginning of the rush to neighborhood movies and the scramble to grab a stool in the corner saloon. I drifted along Fountain to Vermont. There was a food sign to the north, in the middle of the block. A drugstore, cater-cornered across the intersection, had an outside book rack. I was over there, standing in front of the books, when a *Chronicle* truck dumped off the late edition.

My name jumped at me from the headlines.

I snaked the top paper out of the bundle and scuttled back across the street. In the dimmest booth the hash joint had, I gobbled up the details.

The police had my gun. They didn't know how it, accompanied by my name and address typed on a plain white card, had gotten to the homicide bureau at headquarters, but a man had been detailed to find out. The rest of the force was combing the town for me.

The news photo did not look like me. It was poorly printed and showed solid, well-fed jowls. It had been taken when I first entered the detective business, a long time ago. That didn't make me feel any better, because there were dicks, and even harness bulls, in town who knew me by sight.

There was still no mention of Gail Tremaine, no hint that Costain had met his death outside of a disguised and secluded gambling casino in the valley, no suspicion that he might have been the victim of some of the mobsters he defended—or doublecrossed—in court. I seemed to be the only new development. A slug from the mystery gun had been checked against the one they had taken from the corpse. The slugs matched. So the killer was a thick-skulled private investigator with a bad set of nerves named John Aloysius Dillon. The heat was on.

A buck-toothed waitress hovered over me. I snapped the paper shut. She gave me the peeved eye, as if I had as much as accused her of picking my pocket. I didn't see a badge on her anywhere. I breathed again and ordered the deluxe dinner. She flounced away.

None of the customers on the counter stools looked like cops. No eyes peered through the front window at me. It took all the will power I had not to sneak a glance under the table.

I got out a cigarette and started tapping down the tobacco in it. On the third tap, I missed the edge of the table with it and it slipped through my fingers and fell on the floor. I got out another one and finally lit it without tamping it down.

There was a phone on the wall, just behind the booth I was in. I pulled my hat down over my face and hunched out of the booth. I pawed through the book, feeling fairly certain that the Blue Valley Inn would not be listed. It wasn't, so I looked for Duke Mazonik's home number, found it, dialed it, and, for a wonder, he was in.

"Hi, John," he yawned. "What time is it?"

"Going on seven," I breathed. I had a hand around the mouthpiece and spoke with my lips close to the hand. "Read the papers?"

"About Costain?" His tone sharpened. "Yeah, this morning, before I went to bed. Geez, what a mess. Tony is scared stiff. Me, too."

"What do you mean, Tony is scared stiff?" I hissed.

"Quite a story," he said. "Tell you when I see you."

"Tonight's papers say the cops know who did it," I said.

"I'm damned," he grunted. "Was it the D.A. or the Mayor?"

"It isn't funny," I growled. "They think *I* did it."

"You?" His voice exploded against my eardrum. "No."

"Uh-huh. That's what it says in tonight's papers."

Silence. Then: "Where are you, John? In the clink?"

"Cut the kidding," I snarled. "It's not a damn bit funny."

"I ain't kidding, boy. You didn't really do it, did you?"

"Hell, no. Have you got any friends downtown you can trust?"

"Geez, I dunno, boy. There's some as figure I kind of let the department down when I quit. Why?"

"I'm in a jam. I need help. The smart thing would be to turn myself in. I'd do it, if I wasn't afraid of being railroaded to death. You know yourself what they do to guys in my racket, whenever they get a chance."

"Uh-huh. Geez, I dunno. You ain't in jail yet, then, huh?"

"No."

"Where?"

I bit a knuckle of the hand I had cupped around the phone and looked along the sides of my eyes. Nobody seemed to be paying any attention to me. The buck-toothed waitress was at the cash register, up near the front window, making change for a tall stoop-shouldered guy in greasy overalls. The cook was lifting a basket of french fried potatoes out of the hot grease vat with one hand and mopping sweat off his face with the other. The rest of the customers were chin deep in food. I read the white painted letters on the front window: *EFAC ETILE*.

"Elite Cafe," I said, into the phone. "Vermont just north of Fountain, west side of the street. Meet you here?"

"Well, I just woke up," he said, hesitantly. "I gotta be to work in a couple of hours. I—well, hell, sure, I'll be there in half an hour. O.K.?"

"I just ordered dinner," I said. "Look under the back table."

"Sure, John. Don't create no disturbance. Just sit tight."

"Like I was part of the decorations," I agreed. "See you."

I hung up and slid back into the booth and in a minute the waitress came with some pinkish water with grease globs floating on it. She set the bowl in front of me and said: "Drink?"

"Now and then," I grumted. "I mean, coffee. Got beer?"

"Listen, mister," she said. "You ain't stewed are you?"

"Who, me? No," I said.

"No drunks in here, see?"

"Sure not. I'm O.K."

"You got a breath on you."

"Wine. Doctor's orders."

She sniffed sourly and went away.

I chased the lone piece of tomato around in the greasy pink water and captured it and ate it. It went down all right and stayed down, but I pushed the bowl away from me.

The dinner came and coffee with it.

I fooled with the food and ate a little of it and smoked while I ate. After the fourth of fifth mouthful, my stomach began to feel as if it was full of bird shot. I pushed the plate away and smoked and finished the coffee.

I HAD the Costain murder story pretty well memorized and was on the ninth or tenth cigarette when the table creaked and Duke Mazonik squeezed into the other side of the booth. He wasn't smiling.

"I got a paper on the way," he said. "Boy, are you in a jam."

"I've been in jams before," I said. "There must be some smart move I could make, but I just can't think of it."

He shook his head, from side to side, slowly, without taking his eyes off mine. He pulled a newspaper out of his side coat pocket and laid it on the table and squirmed uncomfortably, as if the booth was too tight a fit for him. I felt the same way.

"What's your story?" he asked heavily.

I gave it to him. I told it as briefly as I could, without leaving out any of the details. In the middle of it, Buck Tooth spotted him and came over. He ordered black coffee. She brought the coffee and went away. I went on talking. He massaged his jaw with a big hand while he listened, rubbed his nose with the back of it when I had finished,

squinted at me and scratched his left ear.

"I feel real bad about this, John," he rumbled.

"Not half as bad as I do," I muttered, bleakly.

"I mean, about me bopping you last night," he said. "Then later, about the boys picking you up at the hospital. Those were Tony's boys."

I sat there and stared at him.

"That horn blast did it," he explained. "Some of the boys should've been out with the cars all the time. On account of the rain, they weren't. Anyhow, it must've been when you let the guy's head hit the horn. A couple of the boys jump out to see, is it trouble. It is. It's murder. A car steams away. Yours, but we don't know it then. Two of them tag you to the hospital and phone back. Tony tells them where to take you and hold you so's you won't call no law until he decides what to do."

"Oh, brother," I said, softly. "That beats all."

"Uh-huh. Tony decides he don't want a murder in his back yard and says move it. I argue with him. He's boss, he says, and move it. It's somebody else's trouble. He isn't having any of it. He figures that the law can work just as well starting from scratch in an empty lot in town as they can from his place. So the boys move Costain and turn you loose. That's all."

"Well, I feel a little better." I grinned stiffly at him. "You know what'll happen if the cops pick me up and I tell *my* story."

"I told Tony last night he was compounding—it's dynamite."

"Just tell him now he can pry me loose. It's his worry now."

"His worry, but your neck," Mazonik growled. "Like the dame?"

"The torcher?" I shrugged. "Too much else on my mind to know."

"Yeah," he grunted. He rubbed his jaw again, said: "She like you?"

"No." I chain-smoked a light onto another cigarette and crushed the old stub in a dish. He pulled his lower lip out, folded it over the upper one, held it there with the ball of his thumb and dusted the joint with his eyes.

The clock on the wall behind the counter said eight-fifteen. Buck Tooth was cleaning out the cash register. That meant closing time. The chef was heaving empty milk cases out a back door. A couple of late customers were still stoking themselves at the counter. Outside the front window, traffic seemed to have livened up a bit.

"This Keever," Mazonik said, in a moment. "He sounds tricky."

"He'd skin himself, if it meant money to him," I said.

"Yeah. He pegged you plenty fast. You check him any?"

"No," I said. "I was hoping you had, one time or another."

He shook his head slowly again. "This is a big town, John. Guys like him, they come and they go. You can be in police work damn near all your life and still not know even half of them."

Just then a prowl car swung in and parked, out at the curb. I froze. One of the men in it got out and came into the restaurant and sat down at the counter up front, near the cash register. Mazonik looked where I was looking and back at me and grinned.

"Even cops have to eat," he said, chuckling softly.

"Have fun," I said, bitterly. "I don't feel good."

His grin faded. "Can't blame you," he said quietly.

"What was the trouble between Zarsella and Gannon?"

"Trouble?" He frowned. "Hell, don't make too much out of that. Both of them guys are too smart to pull a killing like this—trouble or no trouble."

"Don't stall me," I said brusquely. "If you know and don't tell me, there are other ways of finding out. I think there was some kind of trouble between Gannon and Costain, too. Gannon is soft on the girl. She works for him. The torcher."

His frown deepened. He chewed his lip and didn't say anything.

"Gannon practically kidded around with me this afternoon," I said. "Either

to pump me, or just to have fun. I went there to pump him, of course, but the kidding stopped when I mentioned the girl's name. He warned me to lay off her—and he didn't mean just professionally."

"It does sound kind of funny at that," he admitted. "What then?"

"Nothing. He had his right bower show me out—and kept my other gun."

"How'd he sound, him and his hard boy? Their voices, I mean. Anything like this voice on the phone? I guess you could spot the killer that way, maybe—if you could hear him, not on the phone, and recognize him."

I SHOOK my head. I told him what I thought about voices over telephones, that they could be disguised and didn't mean anything. He nodded, twisted his face again, closed a big fist up tight, stared at it, opened it slowly, looked at me.

"I'll tell you the truth, John," he said. "Tony never mentioned why he left Lew Gannon. Not to me. You can believe it or not, but we never have talked about it. I figured it was none of my business. I never asked him nothing."

"Better begin now, then," I said.

He shrugged. "I'll prod him, sure."

"If the cops get me, I talk, see?"

"Hell, you couldn't prove nothing."

"With the torcher to back me, yes."

"Uh-huh. Maybe you got something."

The first prowlie finished gobbling and went out and his partner came in and sat on the same stool. His glance met mine, casually, switched to the bill-of-fare chalked on a blackboard under the clock.

"With the heat on me like this, I'm handicapped," I said. "But I can still get around, with luck, and pick up a nugget or two that'll make your old pals down at headquarters listen without laughing in my face."

"Your luck won't hold forever," he said. "Got any ideas?"

"Not any good ones," I said. "The killer could be Gannon—or his smoothie, Eddie Crum, with Gannon behind him. All I need to do is prove that Costain had double-crossed Gannon, or that Gannon hated Costain's guts on account of the girl. Knocking him off out at Zarsella's joint would be just one way of eliminating the old competish—good business—two birds with one slug, as the guy says."

"That would kind of put the girl in the middle, wouldn't it? She was with him. If Gannon was soft on her, like you say, he wouldn't put her in the middle of nothing like that. Now, this house dick might. Keever. He took you, boy. Don't overlook him."

"I won't overlook him. And I'm not going to overlook your boss, either. Competition works both ways. Tony Zarsella may be a fat clown and a soft touch to you, but he's been around a long time. He's hooked his fat fingers in plenty of deals that wouldn't look good in the morning papers. Hell, Costain might even have been blackmailing him."

He didn't like that. He stared at me—a hard stare, developed in the years he walked behind a badge, and before, in the ring, and before that fighting older tougher kids for the right to peddle papers on the busy corners. I met his gaze, squarely. I had been raised in a logging camp myself.

"The killer could be somebody you ain't even thought of, yet," he growled.

"Could be," I growled back at him. "In fact, it could even be you."

Movement and sound went on around us. Headlights out on the street, going both ways, and the swish of tires on pavement. Feet scuffing sidewalk and faces floating past the front windows. Inside, there was the coming and going behind the counter and the rattle of closing-up chores. The prowlie on the front stool was shoveling in the last of his pie.

"Figured out my motive?" Mazonik asked stiffly.

"A gambler's right bower gets more dough than a cop," I said. "Ten times more, you told me last night. But the gambler gets more than the bower. A hundred times more."

"I frame Tony and then step into his shoes, huh?"

"Uh-huh. That is roughly the gist of the idea."

"Geez, who'da thought it. But why kill Costain?"

"Damned if I know. You've got me there, pal."

"Geez, I must be nuts," he sighed. "I'm screwy to even be talking to you. Your gun is the kill gun. The law says so, and you as much as admit it, but you claim you didn't do the job. You are a fugitive, and here I sit. Geez, if that lad up front knew who you were, he'd shoot us both—that's a cinch. I ought to turn you in."

I grinned crookedly and jiggled a cigarette into my face and managed to light it without roasting more than half of my nose.

"Now's your chance," I said. My voice sounded as if it had to come through a pipe. A sewer pipe, ten miles long.

"Hell, John, we are both nuts." He snorted, softly. "I never was much of a policeman. Take it easy. Lay low. I gotta get going. Offhand, I don't really know what I can do for you, but I'll do something. See you, boy."

We shook hands and my hand felt as if he had broken it. I watched him out and then ambled up and paid my check. The prowlie stood behind me, waiting to pay his. I slid out the door. Down at the corner, at Fountain Avenue, I looked back over my shoulder. The prowl car swung out from the curb, did a fast U-turn, with its siren snarling, and headed north on Vermont.

I hiked back to the hotel.

CHAPTER SIX

A Heel Run Down

EXCEPT for an owlish-looking deskman, not the one who had checked me in, the dimmed lobby was empty. Something seemed wrong when I got up to the room. The door was unlocked—but I couldn't remember, for sure, whether I had locked it. I eased inside, closed the door. Nothing moved. Noise in the air shaft was about the same. I found the light.

My suitcase was still under the bed. I hauled it out. A search told me that my stuff was all there, but someone had pawed it over. I sniffed at the soda on the dresser. The bottle was still half full, with a few sluggish last bubbles rising in it. I decided not to touch it. The whiskey bottle was gone.

There were no alcoves or closets to the room where a stranger might hide. I doused the light, stepped into the hallway, locked the door and tried the knob this time. Then I prowled back to the elevator and rode it down.

The deskman leaned against his side of the desk and yawned at me. I pushed through the door to the men's room. Used paper towels littered the floor. Other paper had been dropped around the bowls in the stalls. My nose curled a little at the smell in there. The hungry-eyed, pimply-faced bellhop didn't seem to mind it.

He was a mouth breather. His eyes were glued to a thick, three-inch square picture book and he was lolling in an old worn-out lobby chair in a corner. He glanced up, saw me. His hand, with the book in it, slid off the arm of the chair and dropped behind it. He looked as guilty as if he'd been caught with his hand in a blind man's tin cup.

I grabbed the front of his jacket, lifted him. The picture book dropped and skidded under the chair. He had a breath like a sick mule. I let go of him. He flopped back in the chair, hard. The chair moved. Glass rattled on the floor tiles—my whiskey bottle, empty now.

"Did the guy hire you to ransack my room?" I grated.

"What guy?" he whined. "I ain't ransacked nothing."

"You little— How much did he pay you?"

"Nothing. I don't even know what you mean, fella."

"The hell you don't. I mean fatty, the big guy, Keever."

"Honest, mister, he never paid me nothing. Not a cent."

Hinges squeaked dryly behind me. I whirled. The owlish-looking deskman poked his nose in a couple of inches past the edge of the door and said: "What goes on?"

"Hey, Gus, help," the hop croaked. "This guy's murdering me."

Gus vanished.

I yanked the sawed-off thirty-two out of my belt. The kid paled visibly and seemed to shrink in size until his suit almost fitted loosely. "You asked for it," I snapped. "Talk it up, fast."

"He—that is, the fast guy, he says, keep an eye on you. He never paid me no dough. He just says, keep your seven bucks—if you took it off me, let him know. If you check out, let him know. He says to tail you, if I can. But you don't check out. I seen your bag upstairs when I—"

"Let him know where?" I rapped.

"I forget," he whispered. "I don't remember."

I held the gun muzzle to his nose and grinned nastily.

"Villa Morocco Apartments," he wheezed. "Twelve-B."

I shoved the gun into my pocket and got out of there.

As I hit the street, I heard the brief low growl of another siren over on Vermont. Gus had called the law. I walked west a block and cut north. At Sunset Boulevard, I hailed a cab.

There were warm lights in the Villa Morocco lobby. It looked cozy. I didn't go in. I paid off the cab at the curb and plowed through the entrance arcade to the inner court. Flower fragrance on the air in the court seemed heavier at night than in daytime. Lamps over some of the apartment doors were on. I went back past the splash of the fountain.

Twelve-B was dark. Twelve-A, upstairs, had a look of somebody home. I punched Keever's bell, hoping that it was Keever's, and heard faint and distant chimes followed by nothing. Foliage screened me off from the front office windows. I leaned on the button again, waited. A door opened and closed, somewhere up above, and heels clicked along the balcony. The heels reached the open wooden stairway, clumped down it. The figure was a woman in a fur coat—a large, bosomy blonde. Her heels changed note at the bottom on the patio stone, echoed hollowly under the arcade and faded. The door in front of me was not locked when I thumbed the latch.

I held it open a few inches and listened. Nothing stirred, or screamed. No guns went off in my face. I moved inside, pressed the door shut. Its catch slid in place with a dry click. I held my breath, opened my mouth, grimaced with the strain of not breathing, and listened some more.

Silence almost smothered me. Then a toilet flushed somewhere, distantly, and water flowed in the piping in another part of the building. That made the world seem a little more normal. Around me, in 12B, nobody moved.

After a long moment, I struck a match and a tiny light flared up about twenty paces away. A ghostly face under the brim of a hat gave me a long scared stare. Then I grinned and it grinned foolishly back at me. It was my own face, reflected from the mirrored wall around a familiar appearing dark-tiled fireplace.

A LOT of brocaded furniture bulked dimly in the wavering matchlight. Glassware and polished metal ornaments gleamed dully. There were dark heavy drapes, walls with built-in shelves lined with books and more brassy fire tools on a little rack at the end of the hearth tiles, like the ones upstairs. There was also more thick carpeting to walk on, as soft as swamp moss. It seemed like far too much apartment for any guy living on just a house dick's wages.

I waded across the living room in the dark. A swing door, like the one in Gail Tremaine's apartment, let me into a small serving pantry and then the kitchen. I figured it would be safe to risk a light, that far back, and flipped a switch. The back door was wide open.

I peered out into the night. The alley looked deserted. A light outside the door at the top of the back stairs was on. A

soft cool night breeze blew against my face. I pulled my face in and closed the door on the breeze.

A row of empty beer bottles stood on the drainboard of the kitchen sink. There were some ants in the breadbox, nothing else, no staple groceries on the kitchen shelves. Dishes in the cupboards had a thin film of dust on them. The refrigerator was empty and dusty inside and the electric cord was not even plugged in. The gas stove oven was full of pots and pans that had a look of rust and disuse.

Back in the living room, I lit a few more matches and snooped behind chairs and pawed around in drawers. An antique cherrywood desk held letters addressed to A. J. Keever, some bills with his name on them, half a dozen cigars wrapped in cellophane, plain white envelopes and some stamps in one of the pigeon-holes, several paper matchbooks with AJK on them and one from a New York hotel, a couple of old burned-out light bulbs and a handful of thumbtacks in one of the lower drawers. A lot of odds and ends. Nothing for me.

I didn't hear a noise—I felt it.

There was a half open door in the wall to the left of the desk. I thought and tried and couldn't remember if it had been closed before. I had no recollection of the door at all. Pain seared my fingers as the matchflame burned close to them and died.

I quit breathing again.

My shoes turned to lead. It took all the energy that I had left to lift them forward. When my groping had touched the door frame, I reached the other one into my pocket and gripped the butt of the thirty-two. My lungs caught on fire and my chest began to heave. I had to breathe. I felt up and down the wall inside the door, touched a switch, snapped it.

Keever was lying on the floor in his bedroom—dead.

Somebody had beaten the side of his face to a pulp. The shoulders of his coat were spattered with fresh blood. Blood matted his hair. There was blood on the carpet under his chin. He didn't have any ear at all on the side I could see.

His face looked like fresh killed beef. It glistened wetly, dark red. I touched the door, opened it a little wider, without thinking to look behind it. Keever's outflung hand was warm to the touch, but no pulse flickered in him.

This time I heard something, a step and the rustle of cloth, and remembered about looking behind doors. Then it was too late, of course. Something swished and thudded on top of my hat. I yelled. My hat fell off. The swishing noise came again. I tried to duck. I grabbed blindly at a pants-leg full of muscle and then a third blow landed on the side of my neck. Thunder rumbled in my head. The room turned over and the floor fell on top of me. I straightened my arms and tried to heave the floor off my chest but the room began to rock. Then the lights went out and the room rocked harder. It rocked itself right side up.

I stood up, groggily, took a step, banged my shins on something, moved in another direction, tripped over somebody's leg, pitched forward and almost smashed my face on a bedpost. The post slid past my ear and caught me in the shoulder. More searing pain.

I got my feet untangled, after a while, and hauled myself onto the bed and sat on the edge of it until my head had cleared. Then I got up and toured cautiously around the dark heap on the floor and got the light back on.

Keever hadn't moved. He was still quite dead.

I prodded once more for any sign of a pulse. The killer was messy but thorough. I backed away and got stiffly to my feet. Keever's one unmashed eye stared bleakly at a spot on the carpet about a foot ahead of his nose. His big chin made a deep dent in the nap. Blood was still collecting in the dent. He was not long dead.

A black leather briefcase lay against the wall on the other side of the bed. Papers littered the floor around it. I wiped some blood off my hand on the bed and went around it and tried to read the scattered sheets without bending over. I was afraid if I bent over I would be sick. My head felt large and hollow

and salty saliva was welling in my mouth. My jaws ached with it.

One corner of a velvet document protruded from the briefcase. I looked at it and thought about it. It seemed to be a photostat. Photostats have many uses. Huge corporations spend fortunes on photostats every year. Blackmailers never spend a dime on them—but they sometimes collect on them.

I swallowed hard and took a deep breath and bent over.

The brown document was a photostat of a marriage certificate. The ceremony had been performed in the state of Nevada, in some town with a name I'd never heard of. The girl's name had been Helen Baird. The groom's name was Duke Mazonik. After careful deliberation, I decided that Helen Baird's legal married name must be Mrs. Duke Mazonik. It was still a little groggy.

VOICES reached me from a long way off. I shook my head to clear it some more and the voices got louder—gruff voices, cop voices. Heavy feet thumped the patio stones in the court. I staggered to the light switch, slapped it off.

I was in the kitchen when the door chimes sounded. I wondered how long it would take them to give that up and go on in to find Keever and then charge out the back after me. A lot less time than it would take me to reach the street at the end of the alley, probably. I closed the back door. The soft cool night breeze brushed the last of the cobwebs out of my brain. I went up the back stairs.

When the little Jap maid came into the kitchen and saw me, she yelped and fled back through the serving pantry. I plunged after her. The swing door hit me in the face and staggered me for a moment. Then I butted it open and jumped into Gall Tremaine's living room and halted.

The hand that held the Luger was like a stone block. Behind the hand was a dark sleeve. The dark sleeve was part of a beautifully cut midnight blue dinner jacket with Lew Gannon inside of it.

We stood there for seconds, a few feet apart, and glared at each other like two stray cats that have come nose to nose at the end of a board fence.

He moved first. He put the Luger against my chest and patted me over and dug the sawed-off thirty-two out of my pocket. "You must own a regular arsenal," he drawled, stepping backwards, away from me. The Luger muzzle made a slight arc in the air. "Better come in and explain yourself."

He put the Luger away under his arm and shoved the thirty-two into his left side pocket and held it there. I went past him. Gail Tremaine came out of the bedroom in a strapless evening gown of pale blue. It was enough to make me forget the man with the guns—almost.

"It's you," she said coldly. "You frightened Mina half to death."

"I didn't mean to," I told her. "I was in a hurry."

"So are we," Gannon said dryly. "What's the idea?"

A smoky haze came between them and me. I rubbed the side of my face and shook my head from side to side. My legs began to tremble. I tottered to a chair and dropped into it. The smoky haze got thicker. Voices murmured. Glass tinkled on glass. A cloud of spicy fragrance wrapped itself around my head and a slim white hand with crimson fingernails held a drink under my nose. I grabbed the drink and gulped it. The gray fog evaporated.

"What's the matter with you?" Gannon asked, sharply.

"It's the high cost of living," I said. "It gets me."

"Save the gags," he snapped.

"Living is a big problem," I said. "Just staying alive. Too many guns. Too many hits in the head."

"He sounds punchy." Gail Tremaine said, and laughed harshly.

"A party is what I need. Let's have a party."

"We're late for one now," Gannon said. "Some people are waiting for us at the club. If you don't feel like explaining the intrusion, then get going, but fast."

"No," I said. "Don't rush me. A fel-

low I know got married. That was a long time ago, but I only just now found out about it. It and a little more. I owe him something. I owe you something. I owe your trigger something. I owe my landlord, my tailor and the finance company, too. Got to begin squaring accounts. Let's go."

I hunched forward on the chair, got to my feet. The drink began to work. It hardened my stomach up a bit and I began to feel fairly tough again.

"Watch yourself," Gannon warned. "I read tonight's paper. I know the cops want you, but I'm willing to give you the benefit of any doubt. You're free to blow. Beat it."

"Wait until you read this," I said, and raised my hand to reach inside my coat. His left pocket jumped and the cloth bulged. My hand froze in mid-air. I lowered it, slowly, and grinned.

"Help yourself," I said.

He took a step. His right hand slid in between my coat and shirt and touched the photostat. I grabbed his wrist with both hands, leaned back from the waist, dug both thumbs deep into the back of his hand between the finger bones, and twisted, heaving all my weight forward at the same time. He kicked his feet into the air to save his arm. The photostat flipped at the ceiling, zigzagged to the floor. He landed on his back. The fall shook the building. Air oozed out of his lungs in a long flat groan, as if he wanted to get rid of it and was doing it deliberately.

I gathered in all the guns.

"Hold it," I barked at the girl.

She dropped the brass fire tongs. They hit the hearth with a metallic clatter. More music for the boys downstairs. A phone dial whirred nearby. I shot a glance through the bedroom doorway. The little Jap maid was busily hooking out a number.

"Hey," I yelled, and waved the Luger at her.

She dropped the phone and covered her face with her hands and waited for death.

"Old Killer Dillon," I said bleakly, to no one in particular.

GANNON made a noise. His throat muscles looked like taut ropes under the skin of his neck. Congested blood darkened his face. His arms and legs move jerkily. His hands clawed at his belly.

The girl in the pale blue evening gown didn't move. Strain widened her dark eyes. The pallor of her face made the lipstick on her full-lipped wide mouth look almost black. I grabbed up the photostat and dangled it in front of her.

"Your friend Keever had this made," I growled. "I think he was murdered for it. But I barged in right after he was killed—downstairs, right below this, in his apartment—and the killer had to leave without it. I guess the same guy killed Costain, huh?"

"No," she shook her head. "Oh, no," she said, in a choked voice. "I—who do you mean?"

"The Duke," I said heavily. "You have a very jealous husband, Mrs. Mazonik. I can't say I blame him for much of anything—except the way he put me in the middle of murder."

"Duke Mazonik and I have been divorced for over a year," she whispered.

I shrugged. "That only makes it possible for you to testify against him," I said. "It doesn't change any facts. The Duke killed Harvey Costain, on account of you, probably. With what I have now, the police will have no trouble proving that. The Duke killed Keever, too. *There* was a heel. Maybe he had it coming. That Keever would have blackmailed his own grandmother."

A faint shiver shook her bare shoulders. The man on the floor got his breath back, finally. He gulped it in with a wracking heave of his chest. The congested blood began to go out of his face. His eyes cut me up in little strips and fed me to the sharks.

The girl said: "What now?" Her voice sounded as if she was past caring.

"The joint's crawling with cops," I said. "It's time to whistle for them."

"Not yet," a new voice said.

Duke Mazonik came through the swing door from the kitchen. He had an old worn service revolver in his hand.

It pointed at me. His eyes had a glaze over them. There were stiff lines around his mouth. "Drop them guns, John."

I dropped the guns. The butt of the Luger bounced off my foot and a tickle of pain ran up my leg. It seemed to be one of those days.

"Remember that voice on the phone, John?" the big blond ex-cop asked, in a cold lifeless tone of voice.

I nodded, stiffly. My mouth felt dry and overcrowded with my tongue in it.

"I never put you in the middle, boy," he grated harshly. "You put yourself in the middle. If you coulda kept your face out of this, nobody woulda got hurt, except Harvey Costain. He got what was coming to him."

"What about Keever?" I husked. "He knew Costain was spending a lot of time here. He smelled something fishy. He must have guessed who had a motive for killing Costain. He was the one who dug up the fact that Gail Tremaine was Helen Baird—Mrs. Duke Mazonik. Money might have kept him quiet for a while—until his demands got larger than your bank account. Then what?"

"He stuck *his* face in, yeah. But he ain't got no face no more, has he?"

"No," I said thickly. "He ain't got no face no more. How's my face doing?"

"Not so good, John. Not so good. This is curtains for all of us. Me, too."

Madness glittered in his eyes. His gun had sagged a bit. He raised it, with me as his first target. In the sudden awful silence that fell upon the room, you could hear the remote tread of heavy feet and distant muffled shouts. The police were doing what they could to track me down.

Mazonik cocked the revolver with his thumb and the dry click of the hammer was like the crack of a rifle.

A stealthy movement caught my eye. Gannon's left hand was less than six inches from the butt of the Luger. I smiled waxily at the big round black front end of Mazonik's gun. This was it.

I yelled.

The gun went off and a giant sledge hammered my right shoulder and spun me around. I went down, but not out. Guns slammed. Women screamed. Glass crashed. Police whistles let go, shrilly. Guns kept on slamming. Big flat feet thundered on wood. Wood gave way with a tearing splintering sound. Then everything went black.

I WOKE up in a white room under white sheets on a white bed. My shoulder was packed in white gauze. When the nurse came in, she said that my face was rather white, too. I had lost a little blood.

My first visitor was Lew Gannon. He was very pleasant and spoke quietly, as if he had been warned not to excite the patient. Neither the girl, Gail Tremaine, nor the little Jap maid had been hurt, he told me. One of Mazonik's slugs had nicked him a little, but not seriously. He had shot Mazonik three times with the Luger. The big blond ex-cop was still alive.

He asked how I was feeling and I told him fine. He asked if the District Attorney, or anybody like that, had been in to see me. I shook my head, no. He laid his soft gray felt hat on the white dresser and sat down on the foot of the bed and smiled.

Then he told me that he had asked the authorities not to bother me until I felt better. I said that was nice of him. He kept on smiling and looked a little embarrassed and said not to worry about any hospital bills.

I gave him the eye.

"The D.A. is taking care of your bills," he said. "You cracked a murder case for him pretty fast. It's only fair. You saved more than that in time and money for the city."

"I wasn't working for the city," I said. "Or the D.A. either."

He reached for his hat and got off the bed and then just stood there holding the hat. "I thought you'd like to know," he said.

"Uh-huh, sure," I said. "Thanks for coming."

He fumbled with the hat and looked down at it.

"Thanks for saving my life, too," I told him.

"Oh, hell." He flushed. "I didn't come here for that. You made the holes and did the blocking. Anybody could have carried the ball behind you. Mazonik just signed a full confession, by the way."

He lifted his eyes from the hat. There was something in them, something on his mind. I felt too stiff and old and tired to wonder, or care, what it was. I didn't say anything.

"Harv Costain was Gail's lawyer," he said. "Got the divorce for her on some grounds of brutality—stuff like that. I think she ought to have told you."

"Maybe it slipped her mind," I said, quietly.

"Mazonik waited in your car after the ruckus in the bar out at Tony Zarsella's place in the valley. That's when he found your gun. Costain came out alone to get the car and Mazonik shot him. Zarsella never knew who killed Costain, but he didn't want any trouble, so he had his boys move the body. It all seems rather simple, now, doesn't it?"

He smiled politely again. I let him get on with it.

"It seems that *you* stirred up this flattie—Keever. He smelled some easy blackmail and put the bite on Mazonik. That tipped Mazonik off that you were on the prod. He gave you a scare-off call on the phone in a disguised voice, but it didn't take. So he turned in your gun—the murder weapon—and let the law take its course with you. Then you told him, in some restaurant, that Keever was on your trail. So he decided that he would have to silence the guy, permanently. That left only me in his way."

He watched carefully to see how I took that.

I took it fine, without a word.

"I was next on his list," he said, somberly.

"Is that all in the confession, too?"

"No. But I saw him. And he hates my guts."

"She works for you. Is that it?"

He came out with it then. "I'm planning to marry her," he said, simply. "I'll give her your best wishes and say good-bye to her for you."

He put the hat on, very carefully, waited. A faint smell of ether drifted down the hall and into the room. I lay there and stared sleepily at him. He flushed and turned on his heel and went out.



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A

Rex Sackler

Novelette

CHAPTER ONE

Easy Money

I AM a man who customarily eats a hearty breakfast. However, on this cold February morning the thought of oatmeal acted as an emetic and the idea of scrambled eggs completely unsettled me. All I craved was a pint of bitter black coffee.

There was a taste of old octopus in my mouth and my head was Gene Krupa's drum. My fingers were unsteady and a damp load of remorse sat heavily upon my shoulders. I had, in short, a hangover.

After consuming my liquid breakfast, I staggered from the corner coffeepot into the windy street. I hailed a bus, jammed my miserable self into a horde of unhappy humanity and clung to a greasy strap for dear life as we rumbled downtown to Rex Sackler's office.

Somehow I made my way into the elevator which rode skyward pitching like a destroyer in the North Sea. I emerged into the corridor, made my way precariously down it and opened the frosted office door.

I got over to my desk and sank into my swivel chair without bothering to remove my hat and coat. Sackler's flinty voice cut into my consciousness.

"Good morning, Mr. Manville."

I looked up, blinked and said, "Huh?"

"Manville," he explained patiently. "Thomas Manville, the playboy who you seem to think you are."

"Oh," I said weakly. "Well, a guy's got to let himself go every once in a while. All work and no play—"

"Makes jack," he finished for me.

I knew that he'd stolen that one but I was in no mood to argue, even with Rex Sackler. I got out of the chair and with some effort took off my overcoat.

Sackler sat at his desk as I did so re-

Watch your wallets, friends! Sackler, that parsimonious prince of penny-pinchers, is on the premises. This time it's the case of the counterfeit killer—and the covetous coin-collector is running true to form.



garding me with chiding, disapproving eyes. He ran a thin white hand through his black hair and sighed.

"So," he said, "I find myself the employer of a roisterer, a drunkard, a weak-willed tosspot. The life of a private detective should be above suspicion. We are aligned with law and order. We are the righteous sword of justice."

"Always," I said, "provided the price is right."

He closed his eyes for a moment and looked like a long suffering man. "Joey," he said, "invariably you reduce everything to a financial status. I am speaking to you not of money but of principle. You are spineless. You possess no will. You can not withstand temptation. The smell of whiskey, of a woman's perfume, or the rattle of two dice cause you to sink into a slough of iniquity. Be influenced by your friends, some of whom are steel-willed, solid citizens."

"Don't tell me," I said. "Let me guess. Now, wait a minute. I've got it! It's *you!*"

He frowned at me. "You are still frivolous. Yet you may well emulate me. My will is not putty. What temptation do I yield to?"

That was an easy one. It was true

The chief point of similarity between the two hoods was that they both held guns.

enough that Rex Sackler wallowed in no fleshpots. But steel will, rectitude and righteousness had nothing at all to do with it. The hard fact of the matter was, that in our industrial civilization there aren't any free vices left.

Wickedness costs dough and there never was an O.P.A. on vice. And Sackler was not the boy to toss money away, whether on a loose woman or on the collection plate.

His regard for cash was a holy thing, beside which Nathan Hale's affection for his country, Abelard's love for Heloise, and a lyric writer's emotional ties with the state of Alabama were as nothing at all.

He possessed more United States War Bonds than any three camels could comfortably carry. And he lived like an indigent Hottentot. His furnished room cost him every cent of four bucks a week and his diet was strictly sixty cent table d'hote.

The receiving department of the Salvation Army would have lifted its

eyebrows at his clothes which were older than the twenty-first amendment to the Constitution and shabbier than a carpet-bag.

I put all these facts into a few well chosen phrases and uttered them.

SACKLER heard me out with growing indignation. When I had finished there was a long silence during which a gleam came into his black eyes. Had I been more alert that gleam would have warned me.

It was the expression he invariably wore when some money-making scheme evolved in his chiselling brain. He coughed slightly, took a sack of tobacco from his pocket and proceeded, most inexpertly, to roll himself a cigarette.

"Now, Joey," he said, "you say I have no vices because vices cost money. That is not true. I am not a saint, nor do I begrudge expenditure for certain indulgences. For instance, do you realize that I smoke, perhaps, forty or fifty cigarettes a day?"

That was true enough. Of that number he rolled about half of them and bummed the rest. Figuring it rapidly, I estimated that the cost of this prodigal habit was every bit of four or five cents a day.

"Now," he said, "to prove my point about will power, Joey, I am about to give up smoking as an object lesson to you."

I looked skeptical. I have observed that for a normal man, smoking is the toughest habit to break. It is an automatic habit. Heavy smokers don't even realize that they have lighted a fresh cigarette.

I said: "You can't do it. That is, not for any period of time."

"No? How about three months?"

I shook my head. "I still say you can't do it."

"You and how much cash, Joey?"

A red lantern on a railroad track could not have been plainer than that. In seven years I had not won a bet from Rex Sackler. Thirty percent of the salary he had paid me had found its way back into his own bank account through some kind of gambling device or another.

However, his air of rectitude and righteousness had me thoroughly annoyed. His smug air of superiority trapped me into saying: "A hundred bucks that you can't quit smoking for three months."

He took the misshapen cigarette from his lips, crushed it out in the ash tray on his desk and said: "You're on, Joey. One hundred bucks. Three months. Moreover, I offer you spot cash if you win, and shall deduct it from your salary in four installments if you lose. What could be fairer than that?"

I sat down at my desk aware of an empty, apprehensive sensation at the pit of my stomach. I still believed that it was a most difficult task for a heavy smoker to quit the habit overnight. But against that was the awful fact that Sackler would do anything at all for cash. For a hundred bucks he'd probably give up eating and sleeping for three months.

I was still wondering whether I'd tossed my money in the gutter when the outer door opened and a visitor walked in. He was an odd looking character just this side of forty. He wore an old-fashioned derby hat, a suit whose cut had been the rage at the turn of the century, a black tie in which nestled a single pearl pin which looked genuine to my inexpert eye, and a pair of well polished high shoes.

Sackler inspected him as he entered, like Armour's purchasing agent inspecting a steer. I knew Sackler's gaze essayed to pierce the man's outer garments and peer straight into his pocketbook.

Apparently, he liked what he saw there. He assumed his best floor-walker smile, rubbed his hands together and said: "Ah, good morning, sir."

The stranger nodded. He said: "My name is Wilbur Fleming. I have come to offer you a commission."

Sackler waved him to the chair facing his desk. Fleming took a silk handkerchief from his pocket and dusted its seat. He sat down carefully as if he half expected to find a tack on the chair.

Then he took a snuff box from his

pocket, sniffed a pinch of it delicately and sneezed. He replaced the box and said, half proudly, half defiantly: "You may as well get used to me, sir. I am eccentric. Moreover, I need a stimulant. That west side subway exhausts me."

Sackler nodded rather uneasily. He had not yet pigeon-holed his client. He had not yet decided how much the traffic would bear when it came to the matter of fixing the fee.

"Now," said Fleming, "let us get to the point. I have come here because I have heard it said that you are the best private detective agency in the city. Experience has taught me that it is alway cheaper to have the best."

"Cheaper?" repeated Sackler weakly.

"In the long run."

"Ah," said Sackler, his spirits picking up, "of course."

"Now," said Fleming, "I have two requests to make. You will probably think at least one of them odd. However, since I am willing to pay for my eccentricities I see no reason why you should complain."

"None at all," said Sackler like the fourth assistant director talking to De Mille.

"First," said Fleming, "I desire to learn the present whereabouts of one Donald Lionel Dworkin, who when I last heard of him was living at 206 East 39th Street in this city."

Sackler scribbled something on his desk pad. "When was this?"

"Three years ago."

"And you haven't heard of him since?"

Fleming shook his head. "And I know no one else who knew him. I know of no relatives. This is a hard job so, naturally, it will pay more money than my second request which is simple."

Sackler said, "What is it?"

"I want you to find out who said: *Love is the isthmus which joins the continents of Heaven and earth.*"

SACKLER blinked at him. That was a beautiful thought with capital letters and our office was unaccustomed to such sentimental touches.

Sackler said slowly: "You want me to find out who said that?"

Fleming nodded. "I have long wanted to know the author of such a profound saying. But I am very bad at research."

Sackler scribbled once more on his pad. As he did so Fleming thrust a hand into his breast pocket and withdrew a wallet and two long envelopes. Sackler and I regarded him curiously.

From the wallet he withdrew three bills. I craned my neck and saw that there were two of five hundred dollar denomination; the third bill was a hundred. Sackler stared at the money like a little boy watching a conjuror.

"Now," said Fleming. He put the two five hundreds into one envelope, sealed it and, picking up Sackler's pencil, scrawled across the face of it the one word: *Dworkin.* He put the hundred dollar bill into the second envelope and wrote gravely across its face: *Quotation.*

He handed both envelopes to Sackler and said with an air of a man who has just finished some arduous business, "There!"

Sackler took the envelopes and said: "There what?"

"It is simple," said Fleming. "I do not intend to pay for something I do not get."

Sackler sat still silent. Usually he went right to the heart of the matter immediately a client entered. First he discussed money; then, and only then, would he hear the customer out. But Fleming somehow nonplussed him. He now sat uncertainly with the two envelopes in his hand.

"If within seventy-two hours," went on Fleming, "you have definite information for me regarding the whereabouts of this Donald Dworkin, the envelope containing the two five hundred dollar bills is yours. That information is worth exactly one thousand dollars to me. If within the same period of time you have discovered for me who wrote the line: *Love is the isthmus which joins the continents of Heaven and earth,* the second envelope containing the hundred dollars is yours. For this second task I set you is worth but one tenth of the

first task. Do you understand clearly?"

Sackler nodded weakly.

"As I have told you," said Fleming, "I am eccentric. I must insist that you do not bank this money until it has become yours. It belongs to me until you have done what I have asked you to do. You will keep both envelopes in your desk for three days. Then I will call again. If you have succeeded you keep the money, if not you will return both envelopes to me. Is that clearly understood?"

Sackler nodded again. But this time he made some protest.

"But what if I fail? Surely my time is worth something."

"Your time is worth nothing to me," said Fleming curtly. "You will either accept my terms or hand me back my money."

Even the thought of returning money caused Sackler to wince. He jerked the envelopes out of Fleming's reach and stashed them away in the desk drawer.

"I accept," he said.

Fleming nodded and stood up. "Very well, then. I shall call again in three days to see what you have done."

"Wait a minute," said Sackler, picking up a pencil. "What's your address?"

Fleming said abstractedly: "Twenty-four s—" Then broke off shortly on the sibilant. "You won't need my address. I told you I'd call back in person within three days."

He walked slowly to the door and let himself out into the corridor.

I eyed Sackler with envy and distaste. I said: "You are one lucky thus and so."

"Lucky? Why?"

"Any idiot can find a quotation in the Public Library in twenty minutes and you get a hundred bucks for doing it."

"True," said Sackler. "But can any idiot track down Donald Dworkin? That's where the money lies."

He leaned back in his swivel chair, fixed his eyes on a spot on the ceiling and gave himself over to deep thought. Once I said: "What are you doing? Looking for Dworkin in a trance?"

He did not answer me. He continued his contemplation of the plaster for a full ten minutes. Then he sighed. He brought the chair back to its normal position and with an abstracted expression on his face fumbled in his pockets.

My heart leaped as he produced a little bag of tobacco. I held my breath as he fished a cigarette paper out of another pocket. What he was doing was almost reflex action. He had gone through these same physical actions fifty or more times a day for the past twenty years. Now he repeated it completely unaware of what he was doing.

He rolled the tobacco in the paper in his usual clumsy fashion. He thrust the end of the cigarette between his lips. He fumbled in his pockets for a match. Swiftly I whipped a packet from my pocket, struck a light and held it for him. He leaned forward his cigarette toward the flame and I felt the snappy crumple of a hundred dollar bill in my wallet.

BUT I had enumerated the chickens an instant before they were hatched. Perhaps, he caught sight of the expression of gloating triumph on my face. Anyway he uttered an exclamation of utter horror, snatched the cigarette from between his lips and flung it on the floor.

Then he leaned back in the chair looking like a man who has just missed being hit with an atomic bomb. I shook out the match ruefully and returned to my own desk.

Sackler aimed a trembling forefinger in my direction. "Rat," he said, "you tried to trick me into lighting that cigarette. You are wilful and wicked. Get out of my sight."

I stood up and donned my hat. I said, "Do you mean that I have the rest of the day off?"

"I do not. Go to the Public Library and check Fleming's quotation. While you're doing that, which should be a simple task for even one of your moderate intelligence, I shall check on this Donald Dworkin. Perhaps by sundown we shall be some eleven hundred dollars the richer."

The *we* was rhetorical. Invariably the

firm was a plural entity until the payoff came, then I was given to understand I was strictly a paid employee who should be grateful for my weekly salary without trying to cut in on management's profits.

We'd argued this so often I didn't bother to bring it up again. I went out of the office silently hoping that no one in the Metropolitan area had ever heard of Donald Lionel Dworkin.

Rather to my surprise I spent the better part of the day in the 42nd Street library. I came out into the street again at half past four, hopped a bus and went back to the office. He was grinning behind his desk as I came in.

"Joey," he said, "for once I've been lucky."

"For once?" I said bitterly. "You were born with a pair of golden and loaded dice in your mouth."

He was far too happy to dispute that point.

"This Dworkin," he said, "I got him."

"Do tell," I said sourly.

"The super of the house at the address Fleming gave me knew nothing. Naturally, I went to the post office to see if he'd left a forwarding address."

"And," I said, "he had."

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Because you're lucky. Because once in your youth you doubtless sold your miserable soul to the devil. Because—"

But he was too spiritually high to argue with me. "Yes," he said. "Dworkin left a forwarding address of a place upstate. I phoned them and spoke to his sister. He's now living in Texas. She hears from him regularly. She gave me the address. One afternoon's work and we've made eleven hundred dollars."

"*You,*" I corrected him, "have made a thousand."

He looked at me and faint alarm came into his eyes. He said slowly and fearfully, "You mean—"

"I mean that I've been through every book in the Library and I could not find any record of that corny crack Fleming asked you to run down."

Sackler groaned and clapped a hand to his head. "You looked in Bartlett?"

"I looked in Bartlett and every other book of quotations, every reference book, and I requested and received the aid of two librarians. We couldn't find it."

Sackler looked stricken now.

I said: "You've made a grand on the Dworkin deal. What are you looking so miserable about?"

"But I lose a hundred dollars," he said hollowly. "On a simple matter like that quotation. A hundred dollars, Joey. That kind of money doesn't grow on trees."

"I repeat, you've made a thousand."

But Rex Sackler didn't look at it that way. He felt he was out a hundred bucks just as surely as if someone had picked his pocket.

"Well," he said at last, "we've got a couple of days. Tomorrow I'll go to the library myself."

I shrugged my shoulders. I was concerned about a hundred dollars of my own. I had three months to trick Sackler into smoking a cigarette and I'd feel much easier when it was done.

I arrived at the office on the following morning, having spent a restless night. Sackler had not come in yet. I let myself in with the key, seated myself at the desk and picked up the morning paper.

I finished that, went downstairs and purchased a copy of the early edition of the afternoon paper, and Sackler had not returned yet.

It was almost noon when the door opened and he arrived. There was dark melancholy in his eyes and a worried expression on his thin face. He shook his head sadly and sank wearily into his chair.

"Joey," he said, "you were right. I can't find that quotation."

"Good," I said. "Now you'll have to give him the hundred bucks back."

He uttered a groan which sounded like the agony of a lost soul. However, it came as sweet melody into my ears. Next to making money myself I loved to see Sackler lose it.

An instant later the door opened again and a heavy footfall sounded on the floor. I swung my head around to see Inspector Woolley.

CHAPTER TWO

The Racket Boys

WOOLLEY was a big, impressive man with a pair of black mustachios. He did not like Rex Sackler and at the moment that dislike was written clearly on his face. He strode across the room, halted before Sackler's desk, pointed an accusing forefinger and said loudly: "What do you know of one Arthur Freuh?"

Then before Sackler could open his mouth to reply, Woolley added darkly: "You'd better come clean. This is important and legal business."

Sackler, whose affection for Woolley was only equalled by the Inspector's regard for him, smiled coldly and said: "I know no Arthur Freuh. I never heard of him. And if he is a criminal I resent you suggesting that I have ever associated with him."

"Well," said Woolley heavily to me, "ain't he the white knight, though." He turned back to Sackler and addressed him with severity. "If you don't come clean you'll be associating with quite a number of criminals, son."

Sackler lifted cold, interrogating eyebrows. "What do you mean by that?"

"You're supposed to have a sharp mind. I mean I'll throw you in the clink."

"On what charge?"

"Suspicion of anything, or as a material witness held in the kind of bond it'd kill you to pay. Now what about this Freuh?"

Some of Sackler's arrogance had left him. He knew that nothing would give Woolley more pleasure than to throw him in the pokey.

He said more mildly: "I've told you I know nothing of a man named Freuh. Now, suppose, you tell me why you think I do."

Woolley took a small leather notebook from his pocket. "This," he announced, "is one of those daily reminder books. Each page bears a date, one for each day of the year. On the page dated yesterday there are written the names of three men with whom its owner apparently had appointments yesterday. The first of those names is Joseph Capelli."

"The big racket boy," I said.

"The second," said Woolley, "is that of Ralph Barnshaw."

"A lesser racket boy," said Sackler.

"And the third," said Woolley with an ominous note in his voice, "is the name of Rex Sackler."

"The greatest racket boy of them all," I said heartily.

Sackler ignored that. "Where did you get that book?" he asked.

"My men took it from a corpse, gave it to the Treasury men who were interested in the case. They lent it back to me."

"T men?" I said. "What have they to do with it?"

"That's their business and the police department's," said Woolley bruskly.

"I take it," said Sackler slowly, "that the corpse was that of this Arthur Freuh?"

"Right," said Woolley, "and apparently he had a date with you yesterday."

I shook my head. "No, sir," I said, "the only guy here yesterday was—"

"Arthur Freuh," said Sackler surprisingly.

"You're crazy," I said, "the only guy who was here yesterday was that nut, Fleming."

"I'm beginning to think that Fleming was Freuh. Describe your man, Inspector."

Woolley briefly described Arthur Freuh and it was a perfect description of Wilbur Fleming. Sackler nodded his head. "That's the man."

"What did he want with you?" snapped Woolley.

"To engage me on a confidential matter in no way illegal."

Woolley thought that over and let it drop. He snapped, "Did he give you any money?"

Sackler considered carefully before he answered that question. Precisely what went on in his mind I do not know, but wherever money was concerned he invariably calculated all angles before he committed himself. After a long while he said, "Yes."

"Ah," said Woolley, registering extreme interest. "And what did you do with it?"

Again Sackler did not speak before he thought. Imagining, I supposed, that if Woolley knew the cash was in his desk, he would demand it as evidence or something, Sackler lied calmly. He said: "I banked it."

"Oh," said Woolley and it seemed to me that there was a note of disappointment in his voice, "that's all right, then."

What he meant by that odd remark I did not know. Neither apparently did Sackler. However, Rex was so relieved to change the subject that he became slightly more cooperative.

"I assure you," he said, "that this Fleming or Freuh or whatever his name was had no business with me which would interest you. He only engaged me to locate a couple of items for him."

Woolley seemed surprised. "He wanted something located?"

Sackler nodded. "And nothing material at that."

"Well," said Woolley, "I guess his business with you had nothing to do with my business with him."

Sackler looked at him curiously but Woolley was putting out no more information. The Inspector sighed, pulled a fat cigar from his pocket, put it between his teeth and bade us a curt good day. Then he stalked from the office.

I SAID to Sackler: "What's it all about?"

His thin shoulders shrugged. "I'm not sure. But piecing together Woolley's odd conversation I should say Freuh was just murdered and that it appears like a very interesting case. However, since we haven't been retained I refuse to apply my mind to the interpretation of the Inspector's words."

I sat down at my desk and a sudden thought came to me. I said: "That dough Freuh gave you."

He glanced at me distastefully. "What about it, Joey?"

"You tracked down that Dworkin guy successfully so I suppose you're entitled to those two five hundred dollar bills."

"I did and I am."

"Yeah. But you didn't and you're not on that quotation deal. That hundred bucks should revert to the Freuh estate if he has one. Anyway, it's not yours."

"The time limit Freuh set has not yet expired."

"No, but Freuh has. It's not your dough."

He glared at me. His mind, I knew, was working rapidly as he desperately figured out some specious reason why he was entitled to the hundred bucks as well as to the grand. No brilliant idea had occurred to him by the time the door opened and the two hoods walked in.

One of them was tall, thin and dark. He wore a brown silk shirt with a flashy collar pin. His suit was blue with a pin stripe just a trifle too wide. His lips were tight and his eyes narrowed. His partner was thick and squat, dressed in ready made clothes and his shoes were unshined. The chief point of similarity between them was that they both held guns.

Sackler's normally white face turned tattletale gray. He was thoroughly opposed to violence when it was directed at him. Not that I liked it myself. I have seen battalions of thugs in my day and I knew a tough guy when I laid an eye on one.

I took no chances. I raised my arms above my head without waiting for orders and said: "O.K., boys, the dough is in that desk over there. The top drawer on the left. In two envelopes."

Sackler looked at me like a bishop who has just read a volume of Robert Ingersoll. He said: "Iscariot. Traitor, Biter of nourishing hand."

"On the contrary," I pointed out. "One of my duties is that of bodyguard. I am, perhaps, saving your life. I know you'd never tell them where the dough was while there was a drop of blood left in your veins."

The tall hood said in an odd high pitched voice: "All right, you gees, break it up. We don't want no damned dough."

"My God," I said, "this isn't purely social, is it?"

The tall hood said to his partner: "A comical guy, Jake. Go get him."

Jake crossed the room, studied my features carefully along the sights of his gun and said: "Get up, mug. We're moving."

I got up. I am not garrulous when facing a gun. Across the room I saw that Sackler, too, was standing. He gave me a jaundiced eyes and said: "Earn your keep, Joey. Take them."

I laughed hollowly to let Jake know I took this last crack as a joke. Jake said over his shoulder: "All right, Lou. Let's get going."

Lou nodded. They herded us together just before the office door. There Lou made a little speech.

"We are taking a little trip," he said. "Now, it might look funny to some dopes if we get on the elevator with these rods in our fists."

"Oh, *no*," I said. "Not in this building. No one would pay any attention. No one—"

"Shut up," said Lou and I was certain he meant it.

"So," he continued, "we're going to put the hardware in our pockets. But our hands'll be in our pockets, too. If either of you guys tries to make a break for it, you're dead."

We went out into the hall and got into the elevator. I felt Sackler's eye upon me. I knew he was registering indignation. I knew he was holding me personally responsible for this kidnapping. I was his bodyguard and I wasn't guarding his body. I was going to have to fight like hell to avoid a salary cut.

Out in the street Lou and his little friend herded us into a big sedan parked at the curb. We were ordered into the rear seat. Lou took his place behind the wheel and Jake sat alongside of him, twisting his squat body around so that he could keep an eye on us. He took his thirty-eight from his pocket and balanced it suggestively on the back of the seat.

Lou stepped on the starter and we headed downtown. For the first time since the hoods had come upon us I got a chance to think. Not that it did me any good. What their motives were, I did not know.

We'd been mixed up in no cases involving gangsters lately. Obviously it wasn't a holdup since they had disregarded my information about the cash in the desk. And no one in his right senses would kidnap Sackler for ransom because not all the tortures of Torquemada could wring a single nickel out of him.

I said to Sackler, "Have you any idea what this is all about?"

"A glimmer, Joey. A faint glimmer. It's not too bad. There may be a dollar or so in it."

Jake and Lou remained allergic to conversation. In concert they said, "Shut up."

We cut right on Fourteenth Street and headed toward the River. We came to an eventual halt before a pair of huge warehouse doors, a stone's throw from Washington Market. Jake, who apparently had a high regard for monosyllables, said, "Out."

We got out. Lou locked the car and joined us. We were escorted through a narrow alley at the side of the building. We were stopped before a narrow door with a bell set in the bricks at its side. Lou pressed the bell.

A MOMENT later the door opened. We went into a tiny foyer at the end of which was a flight of wooden stairs. We mounted on Jake's orders. At the top, Lou banged against a door panel. A suave voice said: "Come in."

I gasped as the door opened. The room which I viewed was vast and lavishly furnished. It was not the sort of thing one expected in a warehouse hard by Fourteenth Street. The rug on the floor felt as if it had been stolen from the lobby of Radio City Music Hall. The walls were panelled. The chairs were chrome and red leather. At the far end of the room was an oblong mahogany desk which would have awed anyone but a corporation vice-president.

On one side of the room an open door revealed an elaborate bathroom. There

was a man in there, bending over a green washbasin. As I moved forward into the room I recognized the figure and noted what it was doing.

The man was Joseph Capelli. And he was washing the barrel of an automatic with soap and water.

I didn't know which of these facts surprised me most. First I had never heard of anyone laving a gun. Second, I failed to understand why a man of Capelli's subtle and devious talents should stoop to something as obvious and unnecessary as kidnapping. If he wanted to see Sackler all he had to do was promise him a dollar bill plus his cab fare.

Lou said: "O.K., chief. We got 'em."

Capelli came out of the bathroom, his automatic still in his hand. He tossed it carelessly on the desk, waved cheeringly to Sackler and myself and sat down.

Capelli was a man of about thirty-five. His hair was dark and curly, his face was dark, and his eyes black and liquid. He had begun life in Little Italy and by dint of a ruthless hand and a quick wit had eventually established himself as the top racket boy of the town.

All his life he had cleverly avoided publicity, with the net result that only the coppers, the police reporters, and a harassed D.A.'s office which had never obtained enough evidence to convict him, knew of his activities. The general public had never heard of him.

"Now," he said to Sackler, "I'll tell you what I want."

"Will you?" said Sackler bitterly. "I'll tell *you* what you're going to get."

Capelli lifted his dark eyebrows. "What?"

"Arrested. And indicted this time, too. You can't get away with this." Sackler removed his gaze from Capelli and transferred it to me. "If I'd had an adequate bodyguard your two hoods would be dead now."

Capelli grinned at me. "Take it easy," he counselled. "You don't want to have me pinched, Sackler. I've brought you here to give you some money."

Sackler's indignation fell from him like a strip teaser's brassiere. "I am objective enough," he said primly, "to keep my personal feelings out of a business affair."

"Good," said Capelli. "First, how about a smoke?"

He lifted the lid of an intricately worked silver box to reveal tiers of fat cigars. "I import them," he said. "You couldn't buy them for a buck apiece retail."

I helped myself to set an example and prayed that Sackler would follow suit. He stretched forth his hand, then remembered. He looked at me. He said sweetly: "Cigars don't count, do they, Joey?"

"Try one and see."

He sighed and withdrew his hand reluctantly. Capelli looked at him oddly and closed the box. He said, "I want you to do something simple for me. There's a grand in it."

Sackler forgot he had been deprived of a free dollar cigar. His eyes glittered and a beatific expression wreathed his face. He said curiously: "If you wanted to offer me a fee why did you bring me here at gun point?"

"A fair question," said Capelli. "It seemed the best way to do it. First, it would do me no good to be seen in your office, and it would do you no good at all for me to be seen there. Moreover, if it came to the ears of the coppers they might knock you around to find out why I wanted to see you and you might crack and tell them. I don't want them to know."

"My relations with my clients are confidential," said Sackler with dignity.

"Naturally," said Capelli without conviction. "Moreover, had I phoned you, you may have made the appointment part of your office records. I don't want that done. This deal is just between us. No one is to know of it. Your are not to record it on your books. I am a direct man and it seemed simplest to send two of the boys to bring you in."

"Very well," said Sackler. "What do you want for this thousand dollars? And when do I get it?"

"The moment you have completed the

assignment. I want you to find something for me."

"What?"

"The personal effects of a man named Arthur Freuh."

"Ah," said Sackler, nodding his head and looking as if this was exactly what he had expected.

"This man, Freuh, was murdered last night. I don't have any idea where he lived. But he must have lived somewhere. I don't have any idea what he owned. But he must have owned something. Clothes, toilet effects and things like that at least. I want you to find out where he lived and bring me his personal possessions. If you do that I will pay you a thousand dollars. If, among those effects, there is an item I want very much to get my hands on, I will double the fee."

"And what is that item?"

Capelli shook his head. "That's a trade secret. It's better for both you and me that you don't know." He glanced down at his wristwatch. "Can you have the stuff here in an hour?"

Sackler looked startled. "I'm good," he said, "But not that good. You expect me to find Freuh's address in sixty minutes? Starting from scratch?"

A shadow of disappointment crawled into Capelli's eyes. "You mean you don't already know it?"

"I do not."

"He didn't give it to you when he called on you yesterday?"

That was an illuminating question. What Capelli was really doing was offering Sackler a grand for Freuh's address. He hadn't believed that we would actually have to go out and find it.

"He didn't give it to me," said Sackler. "He only said he'd come back and see me."

Capelli's eyes narrowed. "Did he give you anything else?"

"Only my fee."

"For what?"

Sackler hesitated for a moment, then he said. "That's a trade secret."

Capelli made a gesture of impatience. "Very well, how long will it take you to do what I ask?"

Sackler's shoulders shrugged. "Who knows? Isn't it likely that his landlady will hear or read he is dead and hand his stuff over to the coppers?"

Capelli shook his head. "It isn't likely his landlady knows him under his right name."

"No," said Sackler thoughtfully, "of course not."

"Well, will you do it? And quickly?"

Sackler nodded. "You have hired my brain," he said in a tone which implied Capelli had all the best of the bargain.

"O.K. I'm sorry I can't tell you what that special item is. You'll have to take my word on it when it comes to the bonus."

"Don't worry," said Sackler surprisingly. "I know what it is and I shall hold out until I'm paid."

Both Capelli and I looked at him in some astonishment. Capelli seemed stunned that he could know what the article was and so was I. I certainly had no idea what was going on and I was sure I knew as much as Sackler.

CHAPTER THREE

Betting Between Friends

BEFORE either of us could speak however a familiar, roaring voice sounded from without.

"Either you ten cent punks let me in that door or I'll have three wagon loads of coppers here with a battering ram. By God, I'll—"

Capelli nodded to Lou who had been leaning against the wall ever since we entered. He said: "Let the inspector in."

Lou walked across the yielding carpet and turned the doorknob. On the threshold stood Jake and Woolley. Woolley, to judge by his crimson complexion, was in a fine fury.

Jake stood aside and he strode into the office. The first thing his inflamed eyes fell upon was Sackler. He uttered the bellow of a wounded bull. He levelled an accusing finger at Sackler's concave chest and shouted: "I knew you had your grubby hand in this somewhere."

Sackler drew himself up and looked supercilious. Woolley glared wildly about

the room, embracing both Capelli and Sackler in his gaze, and roared: "You'd both better come clean. What do you know about Freuh? I demand to know."

Capelli held up a soothing hand. Sackler said: "By what right do you demand to know? Are you a grand jury? Are you even an assistant D.A.? You will either shut up or arrest us."

"I don't have to consider that choice," shouted Woolley. "Come on, both of you."

Capelli stood up. "Take it easy, Inspector. Mr. Sackler's excited. I'm willing to tell you what I know. Freuh had an appointment with me yesterday. He didn't keep it. I understand you have his appointment book. Well, he saw Sackler here, and he went to Earnshaw's right after the pinch. But he didn't get here."

Woolley regarded him with distaste. "You seem to know a hell of a lot about it. Have you a pipeline into headquarters?"

"As a matter of fact," said Capelli, "I have. He left Sackler's and was picked up by the Treasury men, searched and released. Then he went to Earnshaw's. He never got here."

Woolley scratched his head. He seemed to resent Capelli's information, and he didn't appear to have enough of his own.

"Well," he said blusteringly, "you stay where I can get you, Capelli. I'm not satisfied with this. I'm going over to see Earnshaw."

"I'll go along," said Sackler. "There's one thing I need to straighten out in this case."

"One thing?" roared Woolley. "There are a half hundred. And I've got Washington and the Commissioner on my neck this time."

"And a fat red neck it is, too," said Sackler as he strode out of the room.

Sackler's tactful remark did not improve Woolley's temper. However, I figured it was that Woolley was so damned baffled about something, that he welcomed Sackler, sharp tongue and all, in the hope that he could be of some aid.

The police car hurtled through the streets to the upper east side and stopped before an expensive apartment house. Woolley pushed past the doorman, got into the elevator and said, "Nine."

We got out at the ninth floor and followed Woolley to a door where he rang a bell. A scar-faced individual opened the door. Woolley flashed his badge and said: "Police. Where's Earnshaw?"

"Sick," said Scarface. "In bed. You can't see him."

"The hell I can't," said Woolley, and pushed past him.

Sackler and I trailed along through a thickly carpeted hallway and eventually found ourselves in a lushly furnished bedroom.

In the centre of a huge bed was Earnshaw. His head was bald and because of the bandages wrapped around his face was, at the moment, the most prominent part of him.

Woolley stood at the foot of the bed and watched a white clad nurse take a thermometer from Earnshaw's lips. Woolley put his hands on hips and said: "What's the matter with you?"

A mumble from the bandages. The three of us cocked our ears toward the bed. I made out the words, "Met with an accident."

Woolley snorted. "You mean some hoods beat you up. Who?"

Earnshaw shook his head. "I'll take care of this. I don't need you."

"Did Freuh beat you up, yesterday?"

Earnshaw shook his head.

"Well, he was here yesterday, wasn't he?"

This time the bandages bobbed up and down.

"Did he leave here alive or dead?"

The bandages were still for a moment. Then came an indignant mumble. "He left here alive and I can prove it."

"By whom?"

"A couple of my boys."

"They'd swear to anything."

"Well, they're witnesses. You have no witnesses at all to the contrary."

There was a lot more dialogue. Most of it was concerned with Woolley's trying to find out who beat Earnshaw up.

But the bandages weren't talking. At last Woolley walked out of the room in utter disgust. Sackler and I followed behind.

"I HOPE," said Woolley when we got down into the street, "that you found out what you wanted to know. I didn't find out anything."

"I think I did," said Sackler, "However, it may take me a couple of days to clean it up for you."

"You miserable punk," exploded Woolley, "it'd take you more than a couple of days to even find out what it was all about. It's a police secret shared only between us and Washington."

"And me," said Sackler, heading toward the subway station.

I lit a cigarette and caught up with him. Deliberately I blew smoke in his face. He sniffed nervously. His nostrils twitched. I did a fast inward gloat. One day wasn't up yet and he craved tobacco.

He said: "Joey, maybe we've been a couple of fools."

"How come?"

"That silly bet. Neither of us can afford that kind of money. We were foolish. Perhaps we should cancel it. You can't afford to lose a hundred dollars."

"I'm not going to. You're choking now. You'll never hold out."

He grunted, but discussed the matter no further.

He spent the next twenty-four hours at his desk apparently engrossed in deep thought. I smoked all day and blew the aroma toward him. He twitched a little but never broke down.

On the following day, he greeted me with a captivating smile. "Joey," he said, "I have a few chores to do today. Your help won't be necessary. So what do you think I'm going to do?"

"I haven't any idea. What?"

"I'm going to give you the whole day off. With pay. You are free to do whatever you like."

I eyed him suspiciously. "You are a Greek bearing a gift. What's the catch?"

"No catch. Enjoy yourself."

I shrugged. I said, "All right," and picked up my hat. I had arrived at the doorway when he said, "And, oh, Joey?"

I stopped and turned around. "What?"

"About that idiotic bet. I was thinking—"

"Think all you like. Don't smoke."

I slammed the door on his curse and went out into the sunlight whistling. I went to two movies and a hockey game.

I hit the office some twenty minutes late the next morning. Sackler had not arrived yet. I let myself in, sat at my desk and ran through the morning paper. I had half finished the sports page when Sackler strolled in.

He carried an oblong package under his arm. There was a carefree smile on his lips and a lilt in his tone as he said: "Good morning, Joey."

I returned the greeting as he stowed his parcel away in a desk drawer, then locked it. He sat down, drew a heavy sigh and looked at me speculatively.

I said: "You seem happy. I take it you have been on a successful pursuit of some unlucky dollar."

He shook his head. "No, Joey. I have been thinking of our personal relations."

"Interesting. Now, I have an uncle over in Jersey who—"

"Idiot. I mean the relations which exist between us. We bicker too much, Joey."

I became wary. "Do we?"

"Indeed. And mostly about money, which is deplorable."

I said incredulously: "You're not going to raise my salary?"

"No. But I want this bickering stopped. Hereafter we will not bet with each other any more. I think that is the trouble."

"That's better than okay with me. I always lose anyway."

"Good. And in order that we get along better I also think that we should cancel all bets which are still in existence between us."

I am not the brightest boy in all the world but I didn't need a sledge hammer to pound the point of this conversation into my skull. I laughed out loud.

I said: "So you're cooking for a

smoke, is that it? So you want to call off the bet in order that you may have a cigarette? Oh, no, brother. This is one bet I'm going to win. Besides, what's become of the steel Sackler will power you spoke to me of only a few days ago?" He scowled at me. I lit a cigarette and blew the smoke ostentatiously in his direction. His scowl became deeper.

"You are a money-grubbing little rat," he said bitterly. "No honor, no decency, no generosity."

I grinned and decided to rub it in. "Since you feel you are possessed of all those three traits, may I call your attention to the fact that you must return Freuh's hundred dollar bill to his estate or to the coppers or whoever gets it. You certainly can't lay claim to it. You failed to find that quotation in the requisite time. You must return that money."

He looked at me sourly.

"Yes, sir," I went on. "I know what's in the back of your conniving brain. You think you can start smoking again and pay me off with that dough which belongs to Freuh. That let's you out for nothing. Well, you're always getting out for nothing. This time it's going to cost you a hundred bucks. If you're dying for a butt now, think how you'll feel in a month."

FOR one of the few times in my life I had him against the wall. The happy mien that he had worn a few moments back had disappeared entirely. There was a little panic in his voice as he said: "And what do you intend to do if I keep this money of Freuh's?"

"Squeal."

"To whom?"

"To Woolley, of course. He hates the idea of you making money almost as much as I do. All I have to do is tell him you've got a hundred you're not entitled to and he'll grab it. If Freuh has no kin, it'll probably go in Dewey's treasury."

He closed his eyes as if my perfidy were more than he could bear. He said in a weak voice: "Go away, Joey. Go out of my sight. Traitor, betrayer, go away. I cannot stand your presence."

Nothing at all loath, I grabbed my hat and went to the door. When I was on the threshold he spoke again.

"While you're out call Capelli. Tell him to be here at one o'clock sharp. Then call Woolley. Tell him to arrive at exactly one fifteen and to bring Earnshaw with him. Tell them all I have important news for them."

I nodded and went out. I stopped in the saloon downstairs and had a couple of quick ones. This was one time I was going to show no mercy. When Sackler took his first smoke—and I was sure he couldn't hold out much longer—I was going to collect a hundred bucks. Moreover, I was going to see he returned the hundred of Freuh's to which he wasn't entitled.

I phoned Capelli, gave him Sackler's message, then decided to go down and deliver Woolley's message personally. That would give me the chance to inform him that Sackler was holding Freuh's dough.

I grabbed a bus and went down to police headquarters.

Woolley greeted me glumly. Apparently he hadn't made much headway in the matter of Arthur Freuh's murder. He brightened up considerably when I gave him Sackler's message.

"Has he really got something?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "He hasn't confided in me. He has, however, got something to which he isn't entitled."

Woolley looked inquiring.

I took a deep breath and told him of Freuh's concern with the quotation, of the fee which was to be held in escrow as it were, and of the fact of Sackler's not earning it.

"Therefore," I concluded righteously, "I believe that hundred dollars should go to Freuh's heirs, not Sackler."

Woolley's eyes were gleaming. "You say it was a hundred dollar bill?"

He emphasized the last three words.

"It was a hundred dollar bill, all right."

"But I thought Rex said he banked the money Freuh gave him?"

"He may have banked the thousand. But I know the hundred is in an envelope in his pocket right now."

Woolley bent his head devoutly and murmured: "Praise be to Heaven."

I stared at him in some surprise. Woolley was not a devout man.

"Why the piety?"

"At last," said Woolley happily, "Mr. Rex Sackler is delivered into my hands. But don't tell him. First I want to know what he's got on this case. After I have learned that I shall pounce. The indignities of years shall be avenged. Joey, I love you. If you ever need a drink badly, come to me and I shall buy it for you. Now, go away and leave me alone while I gloat."

I had not the faintest idea what he was talking about. I left his office and stopped off for another drink. I felt pretty good myself. Though Woolley's attitude had baffled me somewhat I was certain that he wasn't going to let Sackler keep that hundred bucks.

CHAPTER FOUR

A False Note

I HAD a leisurely lunch and killed time until almost one o'clock. Then I took the subway and went back to the office. I had barely removed my hat when Capelli walked in the door. Sackler greeted him effusively.

Capelli nodded, said anxiously: "Did you find out where Freuh lived?"

"Simplicity itself," said Sackler.

"Good. Did you bring me his things?"

Sackler shook his head. "I saw no sense in packing up his personal effects. I only brought what you wanted."

Capelli blinked. "How did you know what I wanted?"

Sackler looked smug and tapped the side of his head in a manner calculated to call attention to the great Sackler brain. Then he opened the desk drawer and withdrew the oblong package I had seen him bring in that morning.

Capelli snatched at it like a hawk at a chicken. He did not open it in the orthodox manner. Instead he tore away a fragment of the paper and peered inside. I peered, too. I made out that the article wrapped up seemed to be an oblong of metal. But I didn't see enough of it to know what it was.

Capelli sighed happily and beamed at Sackler. "You're a genius," he said. "And you've earned two grand."

He took a checkbook from his pocket and wrote rapidly. He handed the check to Sackler, who took it, caressed it, and stowed it away in his one-way wallet.

Capelli said: "Do you mind telling me how you did it?"

"Elementary," said Sackler. "I just looked around the room until I found it."

"That I can understand," said Capelli. "But how did you find the address?"

"Oh, that," said Sackler in his best deprecatory manner. "That was simple. Knowing what I did, Joey could have done it. As a matter of fact, Joey had the same information that I had. And I'm sure he knows how I did it. Joey."

He waved in my direction. I had not the slightest idea how he had found Freuh's address, nor the faintest conception of how he had gone about getting it. He knew this very well. All this act was calculated to prove me a fool and Sackler a genius. I was very happy I had sold him down the river to Woolley.

"Go ahead, big shot," I said. "Tell the class how you did it."

"The day Freuh called here," said Sackler, "he said two things. First, that he had come downtown on the west side subway. Second, he started to give us his address, then thought better of it. But before that second thought came to him, he said. 'Twenty-four,' then stopped. Do you see, Joey?"

I saw nothing and said so.

Sackler went on. "Moreover, when Freuh said 'twenty-four' he began to mention another number. Thus the number was not merely twenty-four. Now could it have been two-hundred-and-forty-something? If so, he would have said 'two-forty' and not 'twenty-four'. Therefore, the number he almost mentioned was twenty-four hundred or twenty-four hundred *and* something. And he came down on the west side subway.

"Now, assuming he lived in Manhat-

tan which is better than an even money guess, there isn't a cross street on the island whose numbers run as high as twenty-four hundred. That leaves only the avenues. Now, what avenue has numbers that high which is contiguous to the west side subway? Obviously, Broadway. Moreover, Broadway that far uptown contains a number of cheap rooming houses, and Freuh, if I had figured him correctly, lived in a rooming house."

By this time I saw it. "So you went to all the twenty-four hundreds on Broadway and asked for a roomer who hadn't been home for a couple of nights?"

"Right. And by means of some little judicious lying I obtained access to his room and procured the item Mr. Capelli considered worth two thousand dollars."

CAPELLI looked impressed. He took a silver cigarette case from his pocket and held it out to Sackler. Sackler's free wheeling hand moved automatically. Then he checked it and looked with sad inquiry at me. I shook my head emphatically. Sackler sighed and refused the free smoke. I took one and Capelli put the case down on the edge of the desk.

"Well," said Capelli, "I guess that just about winds up our business. I guess I'll run along."

"Wait," said Sackler. "Wait a minute or two. I want you to meet a couple of friends of mine. They'll be here shortly."

Capelli looked mildly suspicious but he nodded his head. "All right. In the meantime is there a men's room on this floor?"

I gave him the necessary directions. He went out of the room leaving the torn brown package and his cigarette case on Sackler's desk.

I glanced at Sackler. Despite the fact that his nicotine-conditioned body was crying for tobacco he looked happy. That caused me no wonder. He'd picked up a cold three grand in the last few days.

"Well," I said aloud, "you won't get that hundred."

"What hundred, Joey?"

"The hundred Freuh gave you on condition you tracked down the author of that quotation."

"What gives you the impression I won't keep it, Joey?"

"Because I told Woolley you had it and he's going to take it from you."

He looked at me in sheer horror. When he found his voice he said in shaken accents: "You really did that? You really betrayed me, your employer and friend, to a professional copper?"

"I really did."

He murmured, "My God," three times dramatically. His face was white and I had never seen him so shaken. But then I had never seen him lose a hundred dollars before either.

His hand reached out toward Capelli's cigarette case. I held my breath. He was so upset about the money it seemed he had completely forgotten about not smoking. His fingers took a cigarette from the case and he took a match from his pocket.

I felt like a man whose horse is running eight lengths ahead of the field in the stretch. He struck the match. My heart pounded wildly. He touched it to the tobacco. He inhaled. He took the cigarette from his mouth and blew out the smoke as I bounded up from my chair.

I thrust my upturned palm under his face and yelled: "Pay up! You lose. You're smoking!"

He froze to horrified immobility. He jammed the cigarette out in the glass tray at his elbow. He blinked slowly and adopted a whining tone.

"Now, Joey, you're certainly not going to count that. It was an accident. I was engrossed in more important thought. Besides, I only took one puff."

I kept my palm under his nose. "I am adamant."

"But Joey—"

"I am the Rock of Ages—"

"One lousy puff and—"

"I have the heart of a loan shark at the moment. I am as hard as a diamond. As ruthless as a flood. Give me a hundred bucks."

He cursed heartily. He said, "Natural-

ly, I haven't got the cash with me. I—"

"Don't stall. You've still got that envelope that Freuh gave you."

"But you yourself have said that that isn't mine."

"It isn't. But money's negotiable. You can give me that and give Woolley another hundred from the bank."

He sighed like a heartbroken steam engine, thrust his hand in his pocket and took out the envelope Freuh had given him. He tore it open and withdrew a crisp hundred dollar bill. He said: "Put it in your pocket and may it pay for your not too distant funeral."

I took it, sunk it deeply in my pocket and went back to my desk with a singing heart.

AN INSTANT later Capelli returned from the washroom and an instant after that Woolley walked in the door escorting a well bandaged Earnshaw.

Capelli glanced at our visitors suspiciously. I observed that Sackler looked happy again and wondered at his quick recovery. Earnshaw sat heavily down in a chair, glared at Capelli, and said, "I'm a sick man. What's the idea of dragging me out of my bed?"

"You'll be sicker," said Sackler. "Sit down, Woolley."

Woolley did so, on the edge of the desk. He said: "What's going on? What do you want to tell me?"

"An attitude of more gratitude would be in order," said Sackler smugly; "Once again I have been doing your work for you. How far have *you* moved on the Freuh matter?"

I translated Woolley's grunt as meaning he hadn't moved at all.

"Well," said Sackler. "I have all the answers for you. I also have the plates."

Woolley started. "The plates? Where are they?"

At the moment the oblong package was lying on the desk, and Capelli's arm was lying on the package. Sackler indicated it. Woolley grabbed the parcel. Capelli glared at Sackler and said: "You punk. You double-crosser. You—" His vocabulary seemed strained at that point and he went off into an inarticulate gurgle.

Woolley ripped open the package and took out two pieces of metal. He held them up to the light. "That's it," he said. "Where did you get them?"

"In Freuh's room."

"How did you find his room?"

"I have methods," said Sackler, "far too subtle for the police department."

"Huh," sneered Woolley uncomfortably. "And I suppose you know who killed Freuh?"

"Naturally. Earnshaw."

Woolley blinked. Things were going a little fast for him. They were for me, too. I hadn't the slightest idea what it was all about.

"And," said Woolley heavily, "since you are obviously omniscient, I suppose you also know who beat up Earnshaw?"

"It is too, too apparent," said Sackler. "It was Capelli."

By now Woolley, Earnshaw and Capelli were all staring at him and there was not an iota of friendliness in any eye. Earnshaw and Capelli were frankly angry and somewhat afraid. Woolley was annoyed.

"I am not a genius," began Woolley.

"Consider that statement seconded," interruptel Sackler.

"No," said Woolley, "I am not a genius. I do not know how you found the plates. How you found Freuh's room, how you know Earnshaw killed Freuh, or that Capelli beat Earnshaw up. I do not even know how you knew what Freuh's racket was, or anything else. The matter was a police secret."

"I shall explain it," said Sackler, "in monosyllabic words."

"Do so," said Woolley. He turned and gave me a heavy wink. "Then I shall explain something to you."

"Very well. You, Woolley, came in here interested in Freuh. You also implied that the Treasury men were interested in him. Those two facts argue certain conclusions. First, that Freuh was not an honest citizen. If he was a crook why are the Treasury men interested? What sort of crooks call for their officers? Counterfeiters, obviously."

"Next, Freuh had appointments with Earnshaw and Capelli. They are known racket boys. Obviously, he was trying to interest them in some counterfeiting racket. Then, Capelli offers me money to find out where Freuh lived and to obtain his personal possessions. He offers to double the fee if I find there an item which he will not identify. What could that be, if we accept the conclusion that Freuh is a counterfeiter? Obviously, again, plates.

"So, as per contract, I deliver the plates to Capelli and collect an honest fee."

"You didn't," yelled Capelli, "That copper's got them. He took them from me. He—"

"That doesn't concern me," said Sackler. "*I* delivered them to you."

"All right," said Woolley. "Tell me all about Earnshaw killing Freuh."

"It's easy. Freuh's original deal was with Capelli. But Earnshaw heard of it and wanted to cut himself in. Somehow he got Freuh to see him. Freuh called on Earnshaw after he called on me and before he called on Capelli. But for some reason or other he wouldn't do business with Earnshaw. He was sticking to Capelli. Earnshaw only cared about the plates which apparently Freuh had made with considerable skill. He tried to get the plates by force. He tried to beat the information out of Freuh. But Freuh wouldn't talk and the beating became, inadvertently or not, a murder."

"And Capelli beat Earnshaw up for that?" I said.

"Of course he beat him. Because he thought that Earnshaw's beating had been successful and that Earnshaw knew where the plates were. Had it not been for that he would have killed Earnshaw at once. Then Capelli dragged me down to his place, believing that Freuh had given me his address when he was here. He found out he hadn't and told me to go and find it any way." Sackler bowed modestly and added, "I did."

Woolley nodded. "It makes sense. But you don't have any evidence, do you? I mean the sort of stuff we can take to a courtroom."

"You big dumb goat," said Sackler. "Of course, you have evidence. All sorts of evidence and all around you. Can't you see it?"

Woolley obviously did not relish Sackler's tone. But he shook his head woodenly and said, "No, I don't."

"You have a confession," said Sackler. "From Earnshaw."

"You're crazy," said Earnshaw.

"Oh, no, I'm not. Capelli's mob is bigger and tougher than yours. He didn't kill you last time because he thought you might know where the plates were. Now, it doesn't matter. He'll kill you for killing Freuh. At least, in a courtroom, you can plead self-defense or whatever your lawyer suggests. You've got a fighting chance. You haven't against Capelli's guns. Capelli will kill you. The law might give you as little as ten years. It's pure percentage."

EARNSHAW thought it over for a long silent two minutes. Then he nodded. "All right," he said. "Your way is safer. But, by God, I want Capelli held for assault on me."

"You see," said Sackler to Woolley, "you have a confession and an assault charge. And that cleans up everything for you."

"Thanks," said Woolley without gratitude. He grinned broadly and added, "I'll just take the three of you in."

"The three of us?" said Sackler.

"My very words."

"On what charges?"

"Earnshaw for murder, Capelli for assault, and you for being in possession of counterfeit money."

A warning bell hammered in my skull but I wasn't quite sure exactly what it meant.

"Me?" said Sackler. "Counterfeit money?"

"Yes. You have an envelope in your pocket containing a hundred dollar bill which is counterfeit."

"Me?" said Sackler again. I felt my stomach go suddenly empty. "I'm afraid you're mistaken," went on Sackler. "Whatever gave you that impression?" He glanced over at me and smiled. "Ah,

I get it. Joey told you that. Joey is always kidding the department, Inspector. I've often spoken to him about it. I haven't a hundred dollar bill in my possession. I'll even waive my civil rights and permit you to search me."

"I'll take you up on that," snapped Woolley, advancing upon him.

By this time I'd figured it out. I had the phony bill. And if I opened my mouth and said Sackler had given it to me I'd be the guy in illegal possession of a counterfeit note.

Woolley finished his examination of Sackler's pockets and scowled in my direction. Sackler said, "If you're thinking Freuh gave me a hundred dollars, you're wrong. He gave me two five hundreds which I've banked. The bank would have spotted it if they were bad. Besides, those plates are for hundreds. No, Joey was just kidding you, Woolley. Weren't you, Joey?"

He took a deep drag on a cigarette and watched me speculatively, like a scientist watching a guinea pig. Woolley was staring black murder at me. I took a deep breath and did the only thing I possibly could.

I said: "I was only kidding, Inspector," then I laughed the hollowest laugh this side of Woodlawn Cemetery.

Woolley took a deep breath. He cursed me by bell and book. He fumed, raved and shouted. I stood with my head bowed and took every word of it. At last he grabbed his two glaring prisoners and took them from the room, leaving me alone with Sackler and my sorrow.

He said, rubbing it in: "One certainly enjoys a smoke after a layoff, Joey. You really should quit smoking yourself sometime."

I said: "You rat, how did you know? How did you do it?"

He threw me his most perfect superior smile.

"It was obvious, really from the day Freuh was in here. There was a T man on his tail. He knew he'd be picked up and searched at any moment. He wanted to get rid of his sample phony bill for a day or two, so he gave it to me."

"But he gave you a grand besides?" I inquired.

"That was to shut me up and lull my suspicions. He gave me a legitimate thousand bucks to find out a simple thing—the whereabouts of Dworkin, which Freuh knew himself all the time. Then he offered me a hundred to do something utterly impossible, knowing I'd have to return his hundred when I couldn't do it."

"You mean there is no such quotation?"

"Of course not. Freuh made it up. He's not a literary man, and the quotation stinks. He planted the hundred on me. Then he went down, threw himself into the T man's arms, got pinched and searched. He was clean. He would have come back the next day and got his hundred."

"And lost his grand?"

"What of it? Those plates were magnificent. He and Capelli would have made a fortune with them. I always thought that hundred dollar bill was phony. After I examined the plates and saw they were devised to make bills of that denomination, I *knew* it was."

"So you planted it on me?"

"Sure. After you told Woolley I had it. It enabled me to call off our bet, let me smoke again and for free. It also got a dangerous piece of money out of my possession. I knew Woolley would pin the rap on me when he thought I had it in my pocket."

"Well," I said bitterly, "you haven't done badly at all. You've collected three grand and done nothing. One of your clients is in the can and the other in the next world. And you're smoking again without losing your bet."

He registered a complacency only equalled in the British Colonial office. "No, I didn't do so badly, Joey." He fumbled in his pocket and produced his little bag of tobacco. He looked at me for a thoughtful moment, then for the first time in his life made what to him was a supreme and generous gesture. He held the bag out to me.

"Here, Joey," he said. "Try one of mine."

As I went sprawling in the darkness, Squint Eyes warned: "Any noise and we shoot."



NEVER CALL THE COPS

By
ED EDSTROM

I KNEW that something was wrong the second I walked into the junky little drugstore. There wasn't anyone behind the counter and the three young men in the place were too alert to be loafing.

"I want some tobacco," I announced. "Anyone here to sell it?"

The mean-faced, squint-eyed youth at my right side said mirthlessly: "Right now we're running this place." The broken-nosed but amiable-looking one at my left laughed. So did their partner, a handsome lad, dressed in a zoot suit.

What might have been the end of a broom handle was jabbed into my right kidney. I knew it was a gun. Squint Eyes said: "Just keep quiet and do what you're told and you won't get in no trouble." I started to raise my hands as I thought holdup victims were supposed to do. Broken Nose slapped my face. "Damn it, do you want everybody on the street to see you?"

They marched me back to the stockroom. Broken Nose opened it with a mocking imitation of the doorman's bow. Squint Eyes booted me toward Broken Nose. He steadied me, then helped me over the threshold with a short right to the jaw. As I landed sprawling in the darkness, Squint Eyes warned: "Any noise and we shoot." I could hear them moving a display case against the door.

It hadn't been necessary for Squint Eyes to kick me. Broken Nose's blow

The little druggist just couldn't afford another holdup. The burglaries didn't bother him—it was what happened when he reported them to the law that got him down!

was an extra indignity, too. He probably was some stumblebum trying out his Sunday punch. I got to my feet and peeked through the door crack. I meant to tag those guys—and good.

Suddenly I became conscious of a breathing that was not my own. "Who is it?" I whispered.

"I'm the owner. Are they still there?"

I looked. Zoot Suit was standing guard at the door. His partners were dumping drawers behind the counter. The cash register was open. Squint Eyes and Broken Nose held a quick conference, then walked out of the store followed by Zoot Suit.

"They're gone."

We were out of the stockroom, blinking in the light.

"I hope they didn't get my stuff," the owner said. His head was bald, except for a gray fringe above the ears; his face might have been chubby and innocent, like a child's, if it hadn't been for cheeks and jaw that sagged with an expression at once tired and quizzical, and to that extent adult.

"What stuff?" I asked. Details of the holdup would be important when we were ready to give our information to the police.

THE druggist looked at me sadly without hurry. "Funny how little the public knows about the drugstore business," he said. His blue eyes peered across the gold rims of his glasses with humorous resignation. "Now you take how many people come in here for a paper or a box of tissues or a soda—public's in my store all day and half the night—but what do they know about the business?"

"We're ignorant, all right," I said. "Now let's get going here and call the cops."

The druggist turned his back and rummaged in a secret corner.

"They didn't get it!" he said. "They didn't get it!" He smiled triumphantly. "There's some things it pays to know how to hide."

"Didn't get what, for heaven's sake!" I asked him.

"You know. My drugs. All us druggists get an allotment. If they'd found that—and that's what most of those guys are always after—then I'd have the federals down on my neck as well as the local cops."

He stood staring at me with a hopeful but apprehensive twinkle, as if he regarded the situation as completely explained, but was afraid that probably I would not.

"We'll start with the local boys," I said, and I headed for the phone booth in the corner.

Now the druggist was really frightened. "Mister," he said, "you aren't going to call the station?"

"I sure as hell am."

"But they didn't take any of your money?"

"No, but they didn't have to push me around like that. I can identify those lads and believe me, if I get the chance, I'm going to." I moved toward the phone again. The little druggist made his first show of energy. He moved quickly over to intercept me, with a kind of scuttle like a pet rabbit, and laid a hand as soft as a pink muffin on my arm.

"Please, mister do me a favor. Don't call the police."

I brushed his hand away. "What's the matter with you? You must be doing something illegal to be afraid to call the cops."

"Illegal, mister? Me?" He was pathetic in his pretense of injured dignity, and at the same time his little blue eyes were looking me over with a calculating persistence; I could see his brain trying to figure out what line to take with me.

"Mister, I just can't afford to call the cops again. I don't just mean dollars-and-cents afford. I mean what they do to a fellow when they get here. I ain't got much help these days, and the drugstore is all I've got to live on."

I fastened on the word he meant me to notice. "Call the cops again? What do you mean, again?"

"Mister, this isn't the first time I've been held up. It's the third time. I called

the police the first two times and I'm telling you, mister, I couldn't take it a third time."

I shook my head. "I don't get it."

The owner was picking up his merchandise. "I've got to clean up here before some policeman walks in."

I rubbed my aching jaw. "I hope one does. It'll save me the trouble of calling the cops."

"If you'll just listen," the druggist said, his chubby face frowning and worried looking. "It ain't just the money. That fellow that held me up the first time—all he got was nineteen dollars. I never keep more than thirty-forty dollars in the till."

"Just enough to keep a holdup guy in spending money on his way to the next drugstore, huh?"

"Aw, mister . . . don't be like that, please. You've got to understand what the police do to you when you report a robbery."

"They do what they're hired to do. They look for the guys."

The druggist shook his bald head. "That first time, the plainclothesmen from the holdup squad downtown came to my store. One was a big man, named Burke. He wanted to know if I had insurance. Sure, I had insurance. So Burke accused me of pretending to be held up so that I could collect on the insurance."

My face must have reflected my suspicion.

"Honest, mister. Burke and the fellow with him kept at me for half an hour. I nearly went crazy. Then they decided: All right, I had been held up. They wanted a description. I couldn't give them one."

"You got a look at the guy, didn't you?"

"Yes, but he was just somebody with his hat pulled down over his face. I couldn't even remember what color suit he was wearing. I was too excited to notice. Well, that got Burke going again—it was funny I couldn't give a description. So I made one up and it satisfied Burke."

I began helping the druggist to pick up a box of penny pencils. I nodded to him to go on.

"They told me to close the store. I had to go downtown with them to headquarters. They kept me there all afternoon looking at pictures of guys who do holdups. Front views and side views—hundreds of them and lots of nice-looking fellows, too, like you see in respectable places. I can't identify anybody and so at last they let me go home."

I picked up a sign. It read "Three for a cent." I asked: "Where does this go?" He pointed to a box of hard candies.

"Look," I said, "everybody that's held up has to do that."

The druggist dropped his hands helplessly. "But that's not all, mister. I had to go back in the morning to look at some suspects in the lineup. I told Burke I couldn't be bothered. I had my business to look after. You think Burke cares? He doesn't give a hoot! I was there in the morning. Mister, that goes on for two months. Every time they arrested somebody I had to shut up my store and go down to headquarters to look at him and see if he was the fellow that held me up. It hurt my business plenty. After the first two months Burke let up but I still got phone calls or he would drop around to show me photos of suspects. After six months they let it drop."

WE HAD everything cleaned up. It was all penny, nickel and dime stuff—junk that kids buy. The druggist was sweating. As he put a striped-blue sleeve to his forehead, I asked: "What about the second holdup?"

"All the fellow got was ten dollars. I had dropped my insurance—what's the use of having insurance if the police think you got it for crooked work—and I almost didn't call the police."

"Ah, but you were a good citizen and you did exactly what you were supposed to do?"

"That was how I figured it out. This time Burke wanted to know again if I had insurance. No, sir, not me. I had no

insurance. Burke said, what's the matter? I had insurance the last time—did the company refuse me because I put on phony holdups?" The druggist put his head between his hands and rocked it back and forth. "I tell you, mister, I just about went crazy. They started me on the same old business again—go down to headquarters, look at lineups, look at pictures! Sometimes I got so desperate I almost told Burke 'That's the one!' just to get rid of him. Sometimes I think that's what Burke wants me to do so he can wipe it off the slate."

A little girl walked in, traded the coin in her dirty hand for candy, and walked out. I was still sore at the two thugs who had kicked me around. Now I was sore for letting myself be sorry for the druggist—and at the druggist for making me sorry for him.

"It still doesn't make sense to me not to call the cops when there's a holdup," I said.

The druggist's eyes were pleading. "Mister, you've got to see it my way. I don't mind losing the money. Those three—they got fourteen dollars. That hurts, sure. But it hurts more if I have to keep closing my shop. My children are small and my wife can't run the place. Burke has almost let up on me about the second holdup. But if he knows three fellows—not just one—held me up, he'd hound me until he made me identify somebody, right or wrong."

A shadow fell across the counter, cast by a huge man who had cop written all over him. He was tall but his breadth of shoulder, waist and hips, made him look squat. A gray snap-brim hat sat squarely on his big, square head. His frosty gray eyes rested briefly on me, then on the druggist.

Listlessly, the druggist said: "Hello, Mr. Burke."

Burke pointed to a cigar box and helped himself to three. but made no effort to pay for them. He clipped one, put the cigar to his mouth, lighted it and puffed. Suddenly he pulled a photo from his pocket and shoved it in front of the druggist's face. "This look like the mug who held you up five months ago?"

The druggist shook his head.

"Does it look like the guy who was in here a year ago?"

The druggist looked anxiously. "Some, but that fellow had a mustache—a little, hair-line one."

Burke jammed the cigar in his mouth. Taking out a pencil, he quickly sketched a mustache on the photo. "Is that him?" The druggist studied the altererd picture. "No." "Sure?" "Yes."

Impatiently, Burke put the photograph away. "You better show downtown at ten in the morning. We got some suspects for you to look at."

The druggist nodded wearily. Burke stood there for a second, eyeing me, "What happened to you?" he asked, indicating my jaw with his cigar. I rubbed the sore spot and a speck of dried blood came off on my hand. I didn't say anything and Burke, growling, asked the question again. He had a low boiling point. Well, so did I. I started a smart answer, but the druggist's eyes stopped me.

"I was in an argument," I said.

"Looks like you lost it," Burke snorted.

I glanced at the druggist. "Yeah, I guess I did."

Burke stood in the doorway. To the drugggist, he said: "You be there at ten A.M." To me, he said: "Better be careful about getting into arguments." He left. The druggist was relieved but I was burning.

"Look." I said, "I came in here for some tobacco."

"Yes, sir," he said, smiling. It's on the house."

I slapped my money on the counter. "The hell it is. Who do you think I am —Burke?"

"Oh, no, I . . ."

I pushed the tobacco in my pocket and walked out. The druggist knew damn well I wasn't Burke, And he also knew damn well that the photograph Burke showed him wasn't of any guy who had been in there a year ago or five months ago. It was a perfect likeness of a guy who had been there ten minutes ago—Broken Nose.



LIFTING THE SEPTEMBER BLACK MASK



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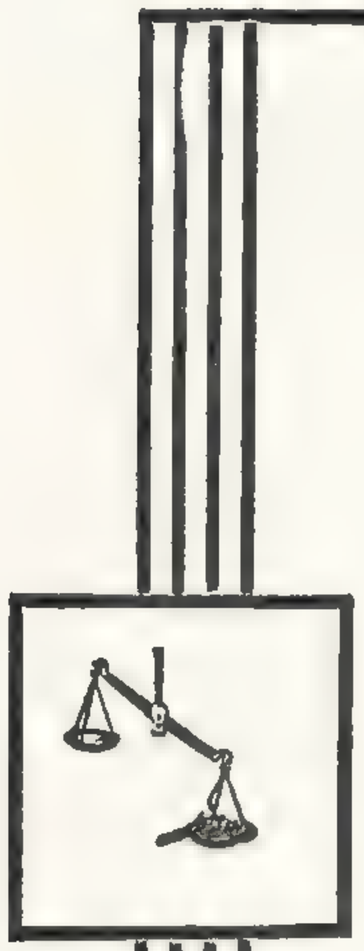
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This great September issue will be on sale July 18.



CAN YOU TAKE THE WITNESS?



Or Can He Take You?

By

JULIUS LONG

1

You are defense counsel for Phineas Jones, charged with murdering his arch-enemy, Wykliff Timmons. The D.A. has rested his case after introducing the testimony of ten eye-witnesses who were present when your client shot Timmons in the back with his rifle. Whereupon you call your first witness, the county surveyor, who states: "I have surveyed the place where the shooting took place, and I have found that though Jones was in this here county when he fired his rifle, Timmons, his victim, was standin' over the line in the adjacent county when the bullet killed him dead!"

The D.A. can offer no evidence to dispute this statement. You request the judge to instruct the jury that if they find from the evidence that Timmons was outside the county when he was killed, then your client must go free, for this county court lacks the venue necessary to try him for his crime. Will the judge grant such a request?

2

You are the D.A. trying Hector C. Morton for the embezzlement of $10,-000.00 entrusted to him as escrow agent in a business deal. The money was on deposit in a special account in your county. Hector traveled to the adjacent county, wrote a check on the full amount and departed in a generally southern direction. He was intercepted at the Mexican border and brought back to your county under escort. You have introduced evidence to prove all the facts above stated. But the defense counsel rises and asks that the court direct a verdict of acquittal for the reason that Hector was not in your county when he committed the criminal act of embezzlement, but in the adjacent county. That's where the wrote his check, and that's where the crime was committed. You object to such a directed verdict. What will the judge do? Will he decide that his court has not proper venue, or will he refuse to direct a verdict?

3

You are defense counsel for a wealthy operator of one-armed bandits. He is on trial in Yokem County for bribing the sheriff thereof. The sheriff has turned state's evidence and admitted the whole transaction, and it looks bad for your client. Then you rise and move the court:

"Your Honor, I move that the case against my client be dismissed. By the sheriff's own statement, he offered his bribe in Bimbo County. The sheriff told him he had to think it over, as he had three other offers from slot machine operators. Later, when he got back home he phoned the defendant that he would accept his proposition. So the crime could not have been committed in Yokem County. It was committed, if at all, in Bimbo County, where the offer was made, not in Yokem County, where it was accepted."

Will the judge grant your motion and dismiss the case against your client?

4

You are the prosecuting attorney trying Joe Brown for tricking Mamie the Moron into taking a "picture" of Joe's estranged wife. The "camera" turns out to be a concealed shotgun, and Mrs. Brown is killed by the innocent albeit stupid hand of Mamie the Moron. After your opening statement alleging that Jones constructed the phony camera and tricked Mamie into using it, the defense counsel includes in his statement the following: Joe admits all facts stated except that his crime was committed in this county in which he is on trial. He constructed his murderous gadget in an adjoining county and tricked Mamie into using it without ever leaving that county. Not once did he come into this county; therefore this court has no jurisdiction by reason of improper venue.

Has the defense counsel a good defense against conviction in your county; that is, will the court dismiss the case if he finds the defense substantiated by evidence?

5

You are the D.A. trying a con man for obtaining money under false pretenses while traveling through your county on a train. You've presented your case and got him dead to rights when the defense counsel calls the conductor of the train as a witness. He asks:

"Do you know what county your train was in at the time of the transaction between the defendant and the man he is alleged to have swindled?"

"I do."

"What county was your train in at such time?"

"Just over the line in Yokem County. It didn't happen in this county at all!"

Whereupon the defense counsel shouts:

"Your Honor, I move this case be dismissed! The conductor has just established the fact that this court has no jurisdiction for want of venue!"

You, the D.A., protest, and after argument the judge calls a recess and retires to his chambers to bone up on the law. When His Honor comes out again, will he dismiss the case or permit it to continue?

6

You are a district attorney, and you have just tried John Lane for murder. The jury has returned an acquittal, and you are much peeved. You button-hole several of the jurors and ask them why they turned the dirty murderer loose. They tell you that they all agreed that he was guilty as hell but they felt that you did not prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the crime happened in this county. They felt it might have happened in Bimbo County, so they voted to throw Lane out as a free man.

You are indignant. You communicate with the prosecuting attorney of Bimbo County and persuade him to indict Lane for his crime all over again. This is done, and Lane's lawyer pleads former jeopardy as a defense. That is, he bases his defense on the fact that Lane has already been tried and found not guilty,

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and to try him again for the same crime would obviously violate his constitutional right.

The prosecuting attorney of Bimbo County argues that though Lane was tried, he was not tried in a court which had jurisdiction. The jury freed Lane because it felt the court did not have jurisdiction, not because it believed him innocent.

What will happen—will Lane's case be thrown out again, or will he be forced to stand trial all over for his crime of murder?

7

You are the D.A., and you have brought a murderer to trial only to have the judge dismiss the case because it appears from the evidence that the murder was committed not in your county but in Bimbo County. So the murderer is tried in Bimbo County, where the judge, from the evidence, decides that it did not happen in Bimbo County, but in your county after all. So you re-indict the killer. His attorney pleads former jeopardy, arguing that his poor client has already been brought to trial in your county before jury duly impaneled and sworn, and the case against him was dismissed.

You argue, in return, that the ground of dismissal was improper venue, that the court believed he did not have jurisdiction, that therefore the former trial did not place the accused under jeopardy.

Who will win the argument, you or the defense counsel?

Answers to Preceding Questions

1

Nope, the judge will not tell the jury any such nonsense. It is true that before a man may be lawfully tried for a crime, the court must have venue, that is the court must have jurisdiction by reason of the crime having been committed inside its geographical limits. In state cases, the limit of a county court is

always the county line. The rules governing the jurisdiction of any county are many, and they vary with each particular crime.

To our knowledge, the only case involving a murder by shooting across a county line was in Virginia. In this case the court held the jurisdiction was the county in which the gun was fired.

That seems sensible to us—for the firing of the gun was the criminal act, and the county in which the criminal act takes place is properly the venue of the crime.

In many jurisdictions it is provided that if a crime takes place near the border between counties, either county is the proper venue.

2

The judge will refuse to direct a verdict of acquittal for two reasons. First, when it is discovered that a court lacks jurisdiction by reason of improper venue, the proper procedure is the dismissal of the case, not a directed verdict of acquittal. Second, the venue of the crime of embezzlement is the county from which the funds were unlawfully removed.

Hector C. Morton fired a check across the county line, very much as did the murderer who fired a bullet, but the trust fund lay in the county in which the trial was taking place; therefore it is the venue of the crime.

3

The judge will dismiss the case against your client. The venue in a bribery case is where the offer of bribery is made, not where it is accepted. The fact that the sheriff's duties were to be performed in the county in which he accepted the offer of bribery does not alter the rule in such cases.

4

No, the defense is not good; the court has jurisdiction because the venue in a



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homicide case is the county in which the homicidal act takes place, whether it is the act of a principal, an accessory or an innocent dupe such as our unfortunate friend Mamie.

5

His Honor will permit the case to continue. It is generally provided by statute that when a criminal act is committed on a train, any county through which the train passes in its journey is proper venue.

In some states, such as Pennsylvania, this rule is broadened to apply to all types of vehicles.

6

Lane will be thrown out. He has been placed in jeopardy regardless of the fact that the jury voted for an acquittal solely because they felt venue had not been proven beyond a reasonable margin of doubt.

If the judge had taken it on himself to dismiss the case because improper venue was obvious, then Lane could have been tried all over again. But when a jury votes for an acquittal it makes no difference what reason—or lack of reason—it had for its act; the accused has been placed under jeopardy, and he may never again be tried for the same crime.

(We assume the absence of fraud and collusion in the acquittal.)

7

The defense counsel will win in a breeze. Whether the judge thought venue was proper is irrelevant. The only important fact is whether venue was proper.

Every indictment contains an allegation of venue. So you, the D.A., are insisting that venue is proper and inconsistently arguing that at the first trial the court lacked jurisdiction by reason of improper venue. Better luck next time.

THE END

(Continued from page 27)

"That's right. And later, Jack and Jean would probably get married. Is that the way it was, Jack?"

He nodded.

"You didn't want to identify Byerly as the killer," I said, "not until you knew he was dead. You couldn't afford to."

"Women," Jack said, and shook his head. "If I hadn't neglected the blonde." He made a gesture with his hand, and suddenly there was a gun in it, a .38.

I'd told him to arm himself, I remembered. I thought, *there are a lot of guns between here and the front door. He can't get through all of them.*

Then I knew he wasn't going to try.

For the barrel of his gun was moving toward his own mouth. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Devine pull his own gun, and my hand smashed up, to knock off Devine's aim.

There was a hell of a racket, as both guns went off. Devine's tore plaster from the ceiling. Jack's blew out a good section of the top of his head.

"That was a hell of a thing to do," Devine told me.

"If he was going to die," I said, "I didn't want a guy like you killing him."

I hoped he'd make something of that, but he didn't. The thumbprint on Byerly's collar later proved to be that of an intern who had handled him.

The poker game was still going on when Glen drove me back to the Dusy. But I didn't want any more poker, not tonight. I drove right home. It had stopped raining.

THE END



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(Continued from page 57)

And we couldn't, although early in the evening Hannen had walked three blocks to the subway station, had taken a long ride on the subway, had walked to the apartment house and had gone up the elevator, then had retraced his journey back home. And nobody along the way who knew him had noticed him.

There was irony for you. Garson, who was innocent and was seen by hundreds of people, was on his way to the electric chair. Hannen, who was guilty and had no alibi, was as far in the clear as a man could be.

Of course, at the time we didn't know anything except that the case against John Garson was complete. Anyway, not until another New Yorker attended to business of his own.

A man named Ambrose Smith started a suit against a hit-and-run driver who, he claimed, had nicked him with his car one rainy night on Columbus Circle. Smith had written down the license number and the exact time.

The car turned out to be John Garson's and the time only two or three minutes before Isabel Lewis had been murdered some two miles away.

So there's the story. A man who hadn't even seen Garson, who'd been attending strictly to his own business, which was to make a profit on a near accident, provided Garson with the alibi he needed. We concentrated on Clarence Hannen and eventually his nerve broke and he confessed, but that's another story.

I hear that this Ambrose Smith is suing Garson for five thousand dollars. He claims he was actually hit and that a scar on his hip proves it. Garson says he never touched him and is contesting the suit.

If I were Garson, I'd show my gratitude by paying off. After all, Ambrose Smith saved his life. And Garson carried liability insurance on his car. What's it his business if the insurance company loses five thousand dollars?

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